

ABSTRACT

THE IMPACT OF A MINISTRY FOCUS ON SPECIFIC SPIRITUAL FORMATION EMPHASES AND THE CONCURRENT PATTERNS OF THE GROWTH OF A SPECIFIC CHURCH PLANT.

By James Thomas Martin

Numerous dynamic structures and methods for church planting have been espoused in order to curtail the 80 percent failure rate of church plants. Yet something other than sole reliance on dynamic structures and methods needs to be considered as an equally important element in possibly stemming the tide of failing church plants. That possible alternative element may be an ongoing spiritual formation process that seeks to keep the structures and methods of the church plant centered on God, in line with the heart of God, and consequently guided and directed by the Holy Spirit.

Utilizing a case study methodology, this research project studied The River United Methodist Church, a new church plant in Richmond, Texas. The study observed and evaluated the participants' self-report of spiritual formation at the conclusion of a study on seven spiritual formation emphases as well as the possible concurrent patterns of growth of the church plant.

Participants perceived a positive impact toward growth of the focus on spiritual formation emphasis on their individual lives and the church as a whole.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled
THE IMPACT OF A MINISTRY FOCUS ON SPECIFIC SPIRITUAL FORMATION
EMPHASES AND THE CONCURRENT PATTERNS OF THE GROWTH OF A
SPECIFIC CHURCH PLANT

presented by

James Thomas Martin

has been accepted towards fulfillment

of the requirements for the

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY degree at

Asbury Theological Seminary

_____ Mentor	_____ April 6, 2009 Date
_____ Internal Reader	_____ April 6, 2009 Date
_____ Executive Director	_____ April 6, 2009 Date

THE IMPACT OF A MINISTRY FOCUS ON SPECIFIC SPIRITUAL FORMATION
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A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of
Asbury Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by

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May 2009

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I want to thank God for his constant love, guidance, strength, and inspiration. Serving him faithfully was the motivation for this paper, and without His sustaining grace, I would not have made it through this process.

To my wife, Terri, I want to thank her for her support, patience, love, and encouragement. This project was as much a labor of love on heart part as it was on mine. Thank you for making the exciting years of ministry better and the more trying times brighter.

I'm especially grateful for the amazing gift of Ralph Waldo Beeson and for those who saw something in me worthy enough to invest in. Being a Beeson Pastor for the year 2006-2007 was a ministering renewing experience for me.

To Joel Green, my mentor, I offer humblest thanks for your investment of time and wide counsel. Thank you for taking on the task of helping me refine this tool.

I was privileged to work with a wonderful Research Reflection Team: Greg and Nikki Holmes, Alex and Liz Jok, Bill and Lois Hill, Bobby and Susan Emison, Shar Elster, Jayne Keyser, and my wife, Terri.

A special thanks to Christie Swaringen and Laurie Lee who helped in the editing process. Thank you for sharing your talents and your wisdom.

Finally, I want to thank the faithful people serving God at The River UMC. Your willingness to take part in this process and your gracious support during the time of this case study has been remarkable. I am grateful to be serving God with you.

CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM

Introduction

C. Peter Wagner suggests the most effective method in reaching a lost world for Jesus Christ is to plant new churches (*Spreading the Power* 11). Dale Galloway and Warren Bird join the chorus of those proclaiming the importance of planting new churches when they say new churches are “the most proven, most effective means for reaching people who do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ” (14). Ed Stetzer states, “Church planting is essential. Without it Christianity will continue to decline in North America” (5). Though people still debate a great deal about church planting, those interested in reaching the unchurched and serving the kingdom of God appear to strongly support church planting as a viable option.

However, not all the news regarding church planting is good. According to Richard Hunter of the North Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church, four out of every five new church starts fail in the first year. The news for the churches that do survive past the first year is equally challenging. According to Hunter, only one in every ten of the churches that survive through their first year typically attracts more than one hundred regular attendees to its primary weekend worship services. In other words, only two church plants out of every one hundred new church starts ever have more than one hundred in regular attendance. Based on the rarity of medium-sized to large-sized churches in North America, one can surmise the number of church plants breaking the two hundred or three hundred mark may be even less. Yet with these challenging

statistics in mind, Galloway's point is still pertinent: if the body of Christ wants to reach persons who are not in a relationship with Jesus Christ, new churches need to be planted.

If new church starts are a primary hope and method for North American evangelism, then those interested in growing the kingdom of God need to discover the causational factors of the low or plateaued growth of so many church plants. Stated positively, those same interested leaders must seek to uncover the key factors or ingredients necessary for an effective, healthy, and growing church plant.

A significant amount of literature suggests changes in the proposed structures and methodologies of church plants. A prime example of the focus on visible structures of churches is Dick Wills' statement: "[A] vital church for the new century will need indigenous worship, small groups, and the empowerment of the laity" (75). Ezra Earl Jones says effective new churches must have—just to name a few—intentionality, open systems, effective leadership, developing opportunities for education, and a specific goal-oriented planning process (15-17). The various chapter titles of Aubrey Malphurs' book, *Planting Growing Churches*, provide a glimpse of his list of needed ingredients in a new church start: "Leading with Sustained Excellence," "Every Member in Ministry," "Worship That Makes a Difference," etc. (7-8). Wagner also adds structurally focused recommendations:

Church growth is a combination of so many institutional, contextual and spiritual factors that I cannot guarantee you will pass through the 200 barrier [referring to weekly attendance]. But I can say that your chances of doing so will be excellent if you follow as many of these six principles as possible: 1) Staffing, 2) Fellowship groups, 3) Leadership: Equipping, 4) Pastor [functioning as significant leader], 5) Facilities, 6) Bylaws. (*Church Planting Harvest* 128)

Many of the prestigious and insightful Christian authors of today tend to emphasize, albeit not exclusively, the structures and methodologies of church plants.

These books on successful church plants are not necessarily inaccurate in what they recommend as ingredients for healthy churches. The structures and methodologies they recommend are often valid, applicable, and inspired by God. However, sometimes the authors or readers tend to over-emphasize structure and methodologies to the apparent neglect of an analogous emphasis on spiritual formation. This perception could be the result of a reader's selective focus on an author's material. Readers may be so intent on discovering "tangible" steps toward church growth that they fail to notice the importance placed by the author on spiritual formation. The presumed absence of an emphasis on spiritual formation may also be the result of an author's assumption that an ever-deepening relationship with God is an understood given toward healthy church planting and growth.

Whatever the cause, focusing solely or predominantly on methods of church planting is not only inadequate to the task of planting healthy churches but may also perpetuate a lack of awareness that the various espoused methodologies of church planting are not the actual root or foundation of a healthy and dynamic church start. The common tendency on the part of eager church planters to exaggerate the emphasis on structure is similar to building the exterior of a car but forgetting to install the motor. An outside observer might consider the car to be in perfect condition; for all intents and purposes, the car *looks* functional. However, if that which propels the car is missing, the car is unlikely to make any forward progress. Despite the understandable inclination of church planters and their teams to focus predominantly on suggested structures and

methods, the body of Christ needs more than flashy facilities, catchy slogans, or cutting-edge action plans. It needs a motor.

Thankfully, many of the same church plant authors who dedicate a substantial amount of their instruction and recommendations to the exterior of the car also acknowledge the necessity of a deeper underpinning that informs and guides the eventual configuration. The current vernacular for that deeper, foundational underpinning is “core values.” Galloway and Bird state the importance of core values:

[Core values] are like the foundation of a building. You can't build well without a firm foundation. They are like the bone structure of a body. You can't have a healthy body without the bones. They are the eyes that lift you beyond maintenance to mission. They answer, “Why do we do what we do?” (31)

Church consultant Lyle E. Schaller echoes similar thoughts when he says, “The most important single element of any corporate, congregational, or denominational culture ... is the value system” (*Getting Things* 152). Those in the business and marketing realm recognize the importance and directional capacity of an institution's value system.

Prominent management leaders such as Ken Blanchard and Michael O'Conner emphasize that today, probably more than at any other time, organizations must have a clear grasp of what they stand for, where they are heading, and how they plan to arrive (3). Blanchard's remarks are not simply applicable to maintenance or growth. Just to survive, an organization must know what it values and why.

Despite the rhetoric and terminology regarding core values, one has to wonder if they truly are the supportive structure of the body of Christ or the foundation of the house of God. As Blanchard points out, many experts almost universally accept the concept that values inform, refine, and perpetuate structures and methodologies (3). Yet the next

predictable question might be, What informs, defines, and perpetuates core values? If these central principles define the identity of an institution and what it does, something inevitably must define the central principles. For example, if the leadership of a church was significantly self-centered, the foundational philosophy that would arise from that particular leadership group would tend to be self-centered and self-serving. A church built on a self-centered philosophy may have small groups, dynamic worship, and visionary leadership. The church may even be able to break the mythical “200 barrier” in weekly attendance, yet a self-centered and self-serving church will struggle to fulfill the Great Commission. Some defining characteristics must differentiate between an institution driven by selfish ideals and an organization that exists for others—for the hurting, the lame, and the lost. That defining characteristic is God-centeredness.

Galloway and Bird come very close to putting their fingers on this differentiating characteristic of a healthy, vital church when they suggest the key to health for every church, leader, and Christian is full surrender, giving oneself as a living sacrifice for God to use as he wills (19). Core values do inform and define the structures, methodologies, and the eventual ministries of a church. However, what is often missed by the eager church planter, or assumed by the author of church plant material is *godly* core values.

Godly core values are acquired through the inspiration, movement, and leadership of the Holy Spirit. The power and dynamic of godly core values was evident in the account of the beginnings of the early church in Acts 1.

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.... You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be

my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:4, 8, NIV)

Putting a value on the approximately three years of training and equipping the disciples received directly from the heart and example of Jesus is difficult. He instructed them in theology, service, love, grace, worship, and ministry. The disciples watched the Spirit work powerfully through Jesus, and experienced that power when they were sent out to do hands-on ministry as a part of the seventy-two. However, even with the training, inspiration, and firsthand experience of the risen Christ, they remained unprepared for the ministry that lay before them. If not for the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit they would have continued to be unprepared. Wagner emphasizes the necessity of the Spirit when he says, “The kingdom of God cannot successfully invade the kingdom of Satan by human ingenuity alone, but only by being endued with power from on high” (*Spreading the Power* 62).

In order for core values to be God-centered and thus directed and inspired by the Holy Spirit, a key ingredient for healthy church planting is an ongoing spiritual formation process that seeks to put the heart of the individuals, and thus the church, in line with the heart of God. The alignment of the individuals with the heart of God would inform the core values which would then inform the structures and ultimately the ministry and witness of the particular body of Christ. Galloway and Bird were correct when they pointed out that full surrender is key. Loren B. Mead was on target when he said, “Our task is no less than the reinvention of the church” (*Five Challenges* 43). Raniero Cantalamessa was probably more accurate when he said the church needed to be *converted* [original emphasis] (*Come, Creator* 201).

Those interested in seeing a dynamic revival in the Church need to seek to convert the church from its standard efforts of trying to find the right program to foster growth. The local church needs to be converted from relying on charismatic leaders or high-energy marketing strategies to reach the world. “The reader [must] understand the centrality and indispensability of the One who founded and established the church—Jesus Christ, without whose presence the starter starts and the planter plants in vain” (Stetzer 327). “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). If the church is ever going to be able to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19), the church must convert to the original source of power, the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual formation is the blood that flows throughout the entire body of the church. Malphurs says, “Spiritual formation is a process through which the Holy Spirit transforms us into Christ’s likeness and image” (*Advanced Strategic Planning* 80). In essence, when one grows spiritually, one experiences the ongoing process of being emptied of oneself and filled to overflowing with the presence of the Holy Spirit. “At its core, spiritual formation means something like growing in grace, becoming more like Jesus, learning to live a holy life, increasing our love for God and service to others” (Senior and Weber 24). Prick a healthy body of Christ and out of it should flow evidences of the presence of Christ sustained by the heart-surrendering nourishment of intentional spiritual formation. Pierce worship and out of it should flow the presence and person of Christ. Penetrate even—and maybe especially—the planning process, and out of it should flow the heart and plans of God. Structures and methodologies are necessary to carry the

lifeblood of the body of Christ. However, structures and methodologies are informed by and do not take precedence over spiritual formation.

Having identified the importance of spiritual formation, the next step is to seek effective means to facilitate spiritual formation. Persons need to learn the meaning of being Christlike, to be “filled with the Holy Spirit,” and what they can do to “press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of [them]” (Phil. 3:12). The proposal of this project is that a—not the—biblically supported pattern for spiritual development would consist of an intentional, honest, and progressive emphasis and experience of the following:

1. The *truths* of the gospel of Jesus Christ,
2. The *desire* for God in one’s life,
3. The *sacrifice/cost* often implicit in one’s surrender,
4. The *promises* inherent in any Christ-centered truth,
5. The *steps* necessary to make ones self more inclined to encounter the truth,
6. The *transformation* of one’s heart, mind, and life relevant to the truth, and
7. The *manifestation* of the Spirit in one’s life consequent to transformation.

One could argue that the above mentioned seven SFE are not an all encompassing list of SFE. Likewise, the context of the Spirit’s movement in any body of seekers or believers may lead to additional or a completely different list of SFE. The goal of this study is to examine the effectiveness of this list of SFE on the perceived spiritual development of participants in a new church plant.

Biblical and Theological Foundations

The account of the events of the day of Pentecost and the characteristics of the early church as found in Acts 2 form the biblical foundation for this project. Stetzer says, “The book of Acts is the most important book ever written on the subject [of the church]” (37). Anthony B. Robinson and Robert W. Wall parallel the church of today with the church before Constantine:

We find ourselves in a new world that looks more like the church before Constantine inaugurated such a huge shift in our social place and role. Today the church has been “disestablished,” and Acts has new relevance, meaning, and power. Indeed, Acts just may be the most relevant book of the Bible for the church as it tries to negotiate its way faithfully in a new time. (10)

The book of Acts (specifically Acts 2:41-47) “lays out the architecture of New Testament church life” (Moore 44), which is a “biblical prototype for church life. The Acts model is viable in any setting or culture” (45) because it has within it the fundamental ingredients for healthy and progressive spiritual development. I. Howard Marshall talks about the early church in Acts:

From the brief summaries in the early chapter of Acts (2:42-47; 4:32-37) we gain a picture of small groups meeting together for teaching, fellowship, prayer and the breaking of bread. Entrance to the church is by baptism with water.... Luke particularly stresses the importance of the Spirit in the life of the church. The Spirit is the common possession of every Christian, the source of joy and power, and Christian leaders are people who are especially filled with the Spirit to perform their various functions. (32)

If one hopes to be faithful to the structure and core values of a healthy and godly church plant, one can hardly do better than to immerse oneself in the book of Acts.

One needs to avoid making the mistake of focusing solely on perceived structures and methodologies found in Acts and missing the underlying values and guiding

principles that form and inform what limited structural references are present. Murray talks about the limited structural references in the book of Acts:

There is a tendency to idealize first century churches in a way that might astound, amuse, or outrage a time-traveling Peter or Paul. There are important principles and examples here, but faithful discipleship and biblical ecclesiology may look quite different in different contexts. The New Testament says relatively little about these structural arrangements, and most of what it does contain are values and principles that can be encapsulated in various structural patterns. It is these values and principles which are crucial, and which need to be recovered in each generation, rather than a pattern which represents the attempt of a previous generation to embody them. (82-83)

When utilizing the book of Acts as a biblical foundation for church planting, one needs to focus on the fact “they had a common emotion. Their hearts were wrapped around the heart and values of God. Their minds were being shaped by the mind and perspective of God” (McManus, *Unstoppable Force* 102). “Devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42) were some of the disciplines the apostles utilized to make themselves available to be shaped by the mind and perspective of God. Making oneself available to be shaped by the mind and purpose of God is at the heart of spiritual formation. Perpetuating that life-transforming, mind-shaping, and heart-renewing encounter with God is *the* hope and ministry of the body of Christ, the church.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this study was to conduct a case study of The River United Methodist Church, a church plant in Richmond, Texas, which observed and evaluated participants’ self-reports of spiritual formation at the conclusion of a study on seven spiritual formation emphases, as well as the concurrent patterns of the spiritual growth of the church plant. The belief was an intentional emphasis on spiritual formation—

specifically focusing on seven spiritual formation emphases (SFE)—would foster spiritual growth and health in persons who participated in the new church. The assumption was that persons who experienced ongoing spiritual growth would help form a foundation for a growing new church plant.

Context of the Study

The context of this study was a growing and changing rural/suburban area whose growth was attributed to the expansion of the larger Houston, Texas, area. The demographic was racially and economically mixed. As early as 2003, the area was nothing but ranches and rice fields. The growth in the area was so significant and swift that as of 2007, the area, serving seven thousand, has only four schools and no churches.

In June 2007, I was appointed by the Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church to plant a church in this changing and growing area. My official appointment was as an associate pastor to Grace Fellowship United Methodist Church, which was the mother church for this church plant. Grace Fellowship provided the salary until the first public worship service of the new church. In the first year, I was to focus 85 percent of my ministry time doing the foundational work of planting the new church.

Along with providing the salary for the first year, Grace Fellowship also provided prayer support and an invitation for me to recruit missional leadership within Grace Fellowship church to help form the core leadership of the church plant. Grace Fellowship also committed to short-term leadership and volunteer loans for a three-month period beginning the first Sunday of weekly worship.

I originally set the launch date for weekly worship services for September 2008. However, due to the limited availability of meeting locations in a clearly defined outreach

area, the time table for all aspects of launching the church was moved up by nine months. Instead of a September 2008 launch date, the eventual launch date for weekly services was 27 January 2008.

A detailed timeline of the church plant and SFE curriculum implementation was as follows:

- June 2007 Appointed as associate to Grace Fellowship.
- August 2007 First gathering of interested participants from Grace
 - First small group meeting based on SFE curriculum
- January 2008 Launch of public services
- Spring 2008 Start of four small groups based on SFE curriculum and led by fall 2007 small group participants
 - Distribution of SFE curriculum for independent reading
- May 2008 First request to independent readers for persons willing to complete questionnaire
- Summer 2008 Start of two small groups based on SFE curriculum and led by spring small group participants
- September 2008 Second request to independent readers for persons willing to complete questionnaire
- December 2008 Request to twenty leaders and church representatives regarding reflective statements

Research Questions

1. In what ways did the participants' self-reports of their spiritual formation at the completion of the study reflect the spiritual formation emphases presented in the eight week study?
2. What evidence of spiritual health and growth was observed in the church plant across the time frame in which participants were engaged in the spiritual formation emphasis, culminating in the one year anniversary of the first public worship?
3. What were some of the contextual, situational, and perceptual factors that may have had a perceived impact on the effect of the spiritual formation emphases on the persons taking part in this study?

Definition of Terms

In this study, I defined the following principal terms:

Spiritual formation emphases (SFE) were the aspects of spiritual formation that when emphasized specifically through the curriculum and dynamics of a small group led to a change in the spiritual growth and development of both the individual and the church community. The seven SFE in this study are

1. The *truths* of the gospel—Any biblical truth related to being in a living relationship with God through Jesus Christ.
2. The *desire* for God in one's life—Asking and honestly dealing with the question of how badly one *wants* or *desires* any given truth to become a reality in one's life.
3. The *sacrifice/cost* implicit in one's surrender—Articulating and coming to grips with the costs inherent in genuinely encountering any truth of the gospel of Christ.

4. The *promise* of the truths of the gospel—Celebrating and recognizing God’s desired result of one’s genuine transformation in light of any given truth of the gospel.

5. The *step(s)* necessary toward encountering God’s truth—Answering and acting on the question of what can one do to make ones self more receptive and available to experience the Spirit’s transformation.

6. The *transformation* taking place in one’s heart, mind, and life—The changed condition of the heart and mind that results in a more natural outflow of the fruit of any given truth. Transformation is not an act, per se, rather the change that precedes an act, the Fruit.

5. The *manifestation* of the Spirit in one’s life consequent to transformation—The visible and/or tangible actions in one’s life and mind that result from genuine Spirit-empowered transformation.

Church growth in this study is demonstrated by the rate of change in the average number of persons attending weekly adult worship services and small groups. The rate of change was examined over a fourteen-month period, ranging from two months prior to launch through twelve months after the launch of the first public worship service. Other indices possibly suggesting growth include the number of recorded professions of faith, baptisms, small groups created, acts of kindness, evangelical outreach, and personal testimonies regarding noticeable transformation. For this study “growth” dealt not only with numeric growth, but more precisely with the perception of progress in spiritual depth, atmosphere, and understanding.

Individual growth is defined as a participant’s perceived level of development in any or all of the following SFE categories: The understanding of the truth, the level of

desire for a relationship with God, an appreciation for and a willingness to make the necessary sacrifices toward that increased depth, an acknowledgement of the promises of a deeper relationship with God, the necessary first steps toward experiencing any truth, a genuine heart and mind transformation relating to God's truth, and the consequent manifestations both individually and as a church of that transformation.

Methodology

This study was a qualitative and descriptive case study that sought to observe and evaluate the participants' self-reports of spiritual formation at the conclusion of a study on seven SFE, as well as the concurrent patterns of the growth of the new church plant. I studied and analyzed the data and statements from questionnaires, Reflection Statements, and my journal entries over the course of the study in order to ascertain any potential perception of growth on the part of participants involved in the study of the SFE. Along with the statistical data from the new church, I evaluated the same sources of data in an attempt to find any possible connection between an emphasis on spiritual formation and the growth or development of the church plant. I based all four analytical devices on a fourteen-month time period, two months before through twelve months after the new church launch date.

Population and Participants

The population for this study was residents of a specific geographically defined area in the Richmond, Texas, area of Fort Bend County. The majority of the participant group had obtained a college degree or higher (93 percent), and lived primarily in a middle- to upper-middle-class culture. The group studied consisted solely of those who attended the church plant. The study focused on a relatively small number of persons—

approximately sixty—who were a part of the first twelve months of a new church plant, and who took part in an eight-week, researcher-developed small group curriculum either in a small group or who read the material independently. The group that provided the reflection statements were drawn from the previously mentioned population and consisted of a more narrowly focused group of ten church leaders—including small group leaders—and ten other persons representing the demographics of the aforementioned population.

The specific breakdown of participants who returned questionnaires was as follows:

- The first group of twelve launch team members who, in October, took part in the original inception of the SFE curriculum;
- Four small groups that met in the spring of the first year of the church plant and were led by four couples from the original October small group;
- Two small groups that met in the summer of the first year of the church plant and were led by leaders who took part in the spring small groups; and,
- Persons who read the SFE curriculum but who did not take part in a group.

Variables

The variables for this case study were the perception of individual spiritual growth and any possible effect on the growth and development of the new church.

A number of possible intervening variables were present that could have had an impact on the degree and development of individual spiritual health and growth. These variables include, but are not limited to, (1) the ability of the leadership—clergy and laity—to communicate adequately and stay focused on the SFE, (2) the demographics of

the area, (3) the methodology of this church plant case study (mother-daughter), (4) the conduciveness of the specific church culture intended to facilitate honest disclosure and dialogue regarding the SFE, (5) the level of other spiritual formation emphases each participant may have experienced outside the ministry of the church plant, and (6) life circumstances that may have impacted spiritual growth and health. Regarding the last two intervening variables, the questionnaire provided participants an opportunity via specific questions to articulate these variables and their possible level of influence.

Instrumentation

I used a researcher-designed questionnaire to measure the perception of possible growth each individual experienced as a result of an intentional focus on the seven SFE (see Appendix A). Other small group leaders and I gave the questionnaire following the completion of an eight week researcher-developed small group curriculum study. The questionnaire consisted of twenty-two questions based predominantly on a five-point Likert scale. I included various fill-in-the-blank and open-ended questions in order to provide data relevant to a participant's own perception of spiritual growth or development. The more subjective questions also provided an opportunity for elaboration and detail of the impact of each SFE. The questionnaire included questions that provided demographic information and data relevant to the participant's life-condition at the time of the study.

In conjunction with the questionnaire, I asked twenty persons to write a one to two-page reflection statement describing their perception of the effect of the focus on the SFE on their own spiritual growth as well as that of the church plant. The twenty participants met at least two of the following criteria: (1) attended leadership and launch

meetings, (2) took part in an eight-week small group study utilizing research-developed curriculum focusing on the SFE, or independently read the eight-week small group curriculum (see Appendix B), and (3) attended weekly worship for a ten-month period after launch.

Along with the qualitative reflection statements, another data source consisted of my journal entries made throughout the design, actual intervention, study, and review process of the project. This data offered a picture of the continuous progression of the intervention from its inception to conclusion.

In order to offer a conjectured connection—albeit statistically uncorroborated at this time—between the spiritual growth and development of the small group participants and the overall growth of the church plant, the final data source was the quantifiable data collected twelve months after the initial launch date. This data included but was not limited to, average weekly attendance, growth in small groups, the number of professions of faith, outreach events, persons involved in compassion ministries, and baptisms.

All four instruments were based on a fourteen-month time period, two months before until twelve months after the new church launch date.

Data Collection

Four sources of data collection were utilized: a small group curriculum questionnaire, reflections statements, researcher journal, and quantitative church data.

Small Group Curriculum Questionnaire

At the completion of the eight week study of the researcher-developed curriculum utilizing the SFE, the other small group leaders and I gave each participant the researcher-designed questionnaire along with an accompanying letter of introduction to

and instruction for the questionnaire (see Appendix C). On the final night of the study, each group set aside twenty minutes and asked participants to fill out the questionnaire and return it to the leader before departing. I sent a letter of instruction (see Appendix D), the questionnaire, a self-addressed and stamped return envelope to persons who were not able to take part in a small group study of the curriculum, but who read the book independently. I asked participants to return their completed questionnaires to me.

Reflection Statements

At the end of the twelve-month study period, I requested the reflection statements via a personal phone call and an accompanying letter of instruction (see Appendix E). Though there was a small sample of participants taking part in the reflective statements, I attempted to foster anonymity by giving each participant the opportunity to turn in their statement anonymously. My hope was to encourage genuine honesty in the content of each reflective statement.

Researcher Journal

Throughout the course of the development, implementation, and study of the intervention, I kept an ongoing journal of thoughts, perceptions, insights, struggles, and observations regarding the small group material, the progress of the small groups, and any perceived effect the focus on the SFE might be having on the new church. At the conclusion of the study, I analyzed these notes in order to provide participant-observer insights into the progression and impact of the intervention.

Quantitative Data

I solicited the help of the church ushers to gather the quantitative data regarding worship attendance on a weekly basis. I gathered this various church data not only for the

purpose of this study, but also at the request of the “mother church,” Grace Fellowship UMC.

Data Analysis

I evaluated the completed questionnaires, reflection statements, researcher’s journal, and quantitative growth data in an effort to ascertain any possible perceived impact the focus on the SFE might have had on participants’ spiritual growth, as well as any perceived evidence of spiritual growth or development of the church as a whole. I also analyzed the data in order to ascertain informed observations as to any perceived impact participants’ life experiences, demographics, or perceptions might have had on the degree of spiritual growth and development individually and as a church.

Delimitations and Generalizability

This study focused on a relatively small sample of sixty persons who took part in an eight-week, researcher-developed curriculum (see Appendix B), either via a small group or independent reading. The participant group was from a specific area of the country, educated, primarily middle to upper-middle-class economic status, and attended a specific church plant. Therefore, the project is limited in its scope, and the findings generalizable to persons from a similar setting and background.

Another restrictive factor of the study’s generalizability was the limited exposure of the participants to a focused emphasis on the seven SFE. The abrupt change in the launch date of the church plant, due to worship space availability, and the consequent push to build a sustainable structure quickly for the new church, severely reduced the amount of time available for training and equipping core leadership in the communication process of the seven SFE. The reduced training period may have had an adverse effect on

the actual encounter and perception of the eight-week small group curriculum in the groups that I did not lead.

A final restrictive factor in regard to generalizability would be the list of seven SFE. I arrived at the seven SFE via biblical and literature research, past ministerial experience, and personal introspection. Given different training, education, and experiences, other SFE could be suggested and might be equally valid.

This research adds to existing studies related to spiritual formation and church health, and adds the component of a specific spiritual formation emphases and their postulated positive effects on one's spiritual formation, as well as potential positive development of a church plant. The findings can have direct implications for pastors who choose to make spiritual formation a significant part of the foundation for their churches by providing at least one other viable option in spiritual formation. The research methodology and findings may also have transference application to other denominations similar to the setting of The United Methodist Church in this study.

Overview of Study

Chapter 2 reviews selected literature, pertinent research, and the biblical and theological foundations of spiritual formation as it relates to church health and planting. Chapter 2 also examines the current writings on spiritual formation and church health and planting.

Chapter 3 presents a detailed explanation of the project's design, the research methods, and the methods of data analysis.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study.

Chapter 5 reports the major findings of the study and the practical applications that flow out of the research. It also offers suggestions for further inquiry and study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE

The North American church is struggling. Despite the touted emergence of numerous mega-churches around the country, studies suggest 80 to 85 percent of churches have either plateaued or are declining (R. Hunter). Not only has the size of the vast majority of churches plateaued or declined, according to some researchers, the impact and the influence of the church has declined as well. Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger describe the decline in the influence of the local church:

[C]hurches are spiritually stagnant and declining numerically. And this decline is in the midst of an increasing population.... The church, as a whole, is doing more and more. And the church, as a whole, is making less and less of a difference.... Lives are not being changed. Transformation is not happening. (228)

Some church health and church growth authors believe one of the vital measures toward turning the tide on this trend is the planting of new churches. According to Wagner, “The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches” (*Church* 11). One need only look through the New Testament to see the outreach methodology of the early church was planting new churches. The early Christians started new churches under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The new believers say planting new churches as a faith and obedient response to the leading of the Spirit the commission of Christ (Stetzer, 52). Malphurs is emphatic about the need to plant Great Commission churches:

The church needs to equip a generation of Christians with a deep passion to plant significant, biblically-based Great Commission churches. These, in turn, will commit themselves to the task of sowing churches to reach various people groups at home and abroad. (*Planting Growing Churches* 16)

Part of the task of Christian leadership today is to instill the vision for planting churches and demonstrate the absolute necessity for humbly seeking the Holy Spirit in that endeavor.

This study operates from the viewpoint that the Christian church exists as the body of Christ to fulfill his mandate to “go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). A church involved in the Great Commission is a church with an intentional focus on being used by God to not only bring the lost into a living relationship with Jesus Christ, but also to assist new believers in growing deeper in that relationship as they become disciple-makers themselves. Malphurs succinctly states the need for an outward-focused church:

The Savior makes it very clear...that the church is to be so much more than a holy huddle or an inward-focused family that cares for its own and no one else. Instead, the church has a Christ-given directive to be outward-focused on a lost and dying world that desperately needs the Savior.
(*Advanced Strategic Planning* 174)

For a church to ever become a Great Commission church, those in the church must acquire a God-given outward-focus for the lost and dying.

This project accepts as a given the stated purpose of the church, as well as a positive correlation between church planting, evangelism, and reaching the lost for Christ through the local church. A motivation for this study was the statistical finding that despite the recurrent suggestions of many church leaders that church planting is vitally important toward evangelism and the overall growth of the catholic church, eight out of every ten church plants cease to exist within the first year (R. Hunter). The reality of this frightening statistic is due, in part, to the ignored or assumed necessity of ongoing

spiritual formation and growth among believers. The issue may be present due to the zealous church planter looking for an easy solution to church growth who ignores the emphasis of spiritual development. The problem may be due to an author's assumption that spiritual formation is a universally understood given in healthy church planting.

Whatever the case, both church planters, church leaders, and church plant authors due tend to neglect spiritual formation and growth as a key and foundational ingredients in church planting. The focus of this study is to examine the relationship between a specific spiritual formation emphasis on the growth and development of individuals in a church plant and the consequent impact on the growth and development of the church plant.

Frequently Suggested Patterns

An ample portion of church planting literature is dedicated to propagating varied structures and methodologies as important elements in creating a strong church plant. Often structure and methodologies are recommended as the factors that can turn the tide of the frustrating 80 percent failure rate of new churches. Schaller writes about some of those structures:

Experience suggests the best way to start a new church that will attract a large cadre of enthusiastic charter members and continue to grow in numbers year after year is to identify the right person to be the mission-developer pastor and for that minister to continue as the pastor for a minimum of twenty-five years. Choosing and retaining the right pastor clearly is *the* [emphasis mine] key variable in planting a new mission that will continue decade after decade to challenge an every-growing number of people with the Good News that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. (44 *Questions* 38)

Later in the same book, Schaller adds two more ingredients to his previously stated "best way" to start a new church: a good vision, and competent leadership (45). George G. Hunter, III supports Schaller's suggestions, but also adds cultural relevance to the list

(*Radical Outreach* 74). Reggie McNeal suggests the “foundation” for a healthy church start needs to have, but not be limited to, teaching systems, long-term thinking, project stability, flexibility, a created climate of change, momentum, a willingness to add small groups, liberalness when assignments are added, etc. (7). A past participant in the doctoral program of Asbury Theological Seminary stated in his 1996 dissertation that the six ministry strategies for a successful church plant are a persistent philosophy of ministry, relevant preaching, a big church mentality, quality ministry, indigenous music, and empowered visionary leadership (Davenport 17). Malphurs proposes seven biblical principles toward church planting and growth:

There are at least seven biblical principles that are critical to church growth and the planting of biblically based churches. The first is a Great Commission vision that involves pursuing, evangelizing, and discipling lost people. The second is a strong servant-leadership; a plurality of lay leaders has proved insufficient to lead the church. The third is a well-equipped, mobilized lay army. The fourth is a culturally relevant ministry. The fifth is holistic, authentic worship. The sixth is a biblical, culturally relevant evangelism that focuses on the various biblical styles of evangelism and emphasizes forms other than confrontational evangelism. The last is a robust network of small groups. (*Planting Growing Churches* 27)

The list of recommended structures is extensive, varied, and at times overwhelming to those interested in planting healthy new churches.

John P. Kotter adds to the cacophony of voices suggesting one more methodological premise when he says, “Rather than relying on programs designed to fill holes or meet isolated needs, go for an integrated menu of *high-stakes activities* [emphasis mine] that directly transforms hearts and pounds the gates of Hell to splinters” (20). Though the concept of transformed hearts should be understood as the ultimate direction and goal of the church, church plant pastors too frequently read these

emboldening statements and focus more readily on the “high-stakes activities” while missing the goal of transforming hearts. Consequently they fall prey to church, clergy, and laity burn out. Some authors seem to almost perpetuate the mindset of over-activity. In Ralph Moore’s recommendations regarding steps toward holding an effective church planning retreat, he says that the core leadership needs to “allow lots of time for discussion and mutual daydreaming. Let the new church emerge from your discussions. You will soon have dozens of fresh ideas about how to do ministry” (82). A healthy goal of an effective planning retreat is not simply to compile more activities with which to overwhelm a congregation. Rather, the healthy take-away of a church planning retreat is to arrive at a Spirit-led vision and action plan. Anything less is less.

As stated earlier, the apparent overemphases on structure, methodologies, and ministries may be the result of desperate church planters looking for any tangible and immediate “fix” to their church plant dilemma. Stetzer admits, “Pastors often look for the latest technique and fad to make their church grow” (24). Because of their selective reading, anxious pastors often miss the clearly stated emphasis on spiritual formation. Like Stetzer, McNeal talks about the overemphasis of programming:

A spate of program fixes have consistently over-promised and under-delivered. The suggestions are plentiful: offer small groups, contemporize your worship, market your services, focus on customer service, create a spiritual experience, become seeker-friendly, create a high-expectation member culture, purify the church from bad doctrine, return the church to the basics. After decades of this kind of environment, no wonder church leaders are a little skeptical about the “next thing” and why many feel that just about the time they catch up, they fall further behind.... Faced with diminishing returns on investment of money, time, and energy, church leaders have spent much of the last five decades trying to figure out how to do church better. Emphases have come and gone in rapid succession. Church and lay renewal has given way to church growth, which has given way to church health. All this activity anesthetizes the pain of loss. It offers a way to stay busy and preoccupied with methodological pursuits

while not facing the hard truth: none of this seems to be making much of a difference. Church activity is a poor substitute for genuine spiritual vitality. (7)

Oswald Chambers describes the current dilemma by stating “the great enemy of the Lord Jesus Christ” is a perception of life established by “the systems of the world in which endless energy and activities are insisted upon” (216). McNeal gets right to the point when he discusses the ramifications of the overemphasis on structures, methodologies, and activities:

Fallout is not limited to the clergy. Many church members feel they have been sold a bill of goods. They were promised that if they would be a good church member, if they would discover their gifts, or join a small group, sign up for a church ministry, give to the building program, learn to clap or dance in worship, or attend this or that, they would experience a full and meaningful life. Trouble is, we don’t have much evidence to support the assumption that all this church activity has produced more mature followers of Jesus. It has produced many tired, burned-out members who find that their lives mimic the lives and dilemmas of people in the culture who don’t pay all the church rent. (8)

R. E. Neighbour says, “When the great dynamic of the church (The Holy Ghost) is inoperative because of Laodicean conditions in the church, then the church turns aside to countless methods and schemes to produce a forced and unnatural growth” (254). The church has forgotten the focus of the church is not being in competition with other churches or offering everything the world has to offer. Rather, the focus of the church is Jesus Christ and him crucified. The endless lists of activities and programs help to make the church appear successful and relevant. All too often, the bloated calendar and bureaucratic structure serve only as a façade to hide the shallowness and lukewarmness of an empty and floundering foundation.

Core Values

The church plant authors—as well as church health authors—who recognize the degenerative direction of out-of-control structures, ministries and activities, tend to emphasize the necessity of any church or ministry finding its direction and focus in a firm and guiding nucleus. This firming, guiding, and sustaining nucleus is frequently referred to as “core values.” Stuart Murray refers to these core values and their foundational importance when he says, “It is not that the shape of the church is unimportant, but there are more fundamental matters which, if ignored, will consign any reshaping of the church to strategic insignificance” (84). Galloway and Bird specifically refer to core values as the foundation:

They [core values] are like the foundation of a building. You can’t build well without a firm foundation. They are like the bone structure of a body. You can’t have a healthy body without the bones. They are the eyes that lift you beyond maintenance to mission. They answer, “Why do we do what we do?” (31)

In reference to the strategic planning of a church plant—and, for that matter, the strategic planning of any church—Malphurs says he begins with “core values because they are the foundation for and will dictate the mission and vision” (*Advanced Strategic Planning* 17). Malphurs stresses the importance of core value:

If your core values do not sustain your mission or move your church toward your mission, you will not accomplish it. This means you will need to determine what values are necessary to sustain a Great Commission mission and begin to embrace these values in your church through your primary activities. (138)

How a church arrives at its foundational principles becomes a key concern. If the core values are not ascertained by careful biblical study and insightful guidance from the Holy Spirit, the resulting central ideals will unlikely be God centered and life transforming.

One needs to acknowledge the indispensability of core values, as well as the foundational and guiding reality of their presence. If the local church and its leadership does not know what it values, the church's actions and directions will always be unfocused and ambiguous. However, because of the foundational aspect of core values, a church that wishes to be healthy and Christ centered needs to deal with the question of what forms and informs its core values. One cannot directly transfer the foundational principles of a Fortune 500 company into the local church. One would find it difficult to support the idea that financial profit and market share—if these are “Fortune 500” company core values—are sound biblical core values for the people of God. If the church of Jesus Christ has as its core the truth of the gospel of Christ as found in the Bible, then the Bible must hold the key to what should ultimately inform the core values of a Christ-centered church.

Malphurs offers a suggestion regarding biblical core values: “The way to spot these values is to examine the ones given in Acts 2:41-47. Luke lists at least four that are key to pursuing the Great Commission mission: Bible doctrine, worship, fellowship (possibly communion), and evangelism” (138). Though the biblical underpinning of this research project is Acts 2, and though Malphurs is correct in that these verses offer a focused view of the essence of the church of Jesus Christ, simply listing these four does little to genuinely form or transform the core values of a church.

Some have wrongly believed that a simple restatement of biblical truth is all that is necessary to bring about hoped for or needed change and transformation. McNeal has recognized this tendency and cautioned that the spirituality of the North American church is “largely on a head trip” (55). For example, although worship—individually or

corporately—is an indispensable aspect of following God, simply stating a church needs to have worship is like saying a professional basketball team needs to play well in order to win a ballgame. Both are true, but something must enable and equip a basketball team to play well, just as something must go before worship that in turn informs and forms worship. Wayne Cordeiro, Robert Lewis, and Warren Bird state the need for an enabling dynamic, “Quick fixes may inject a momentary spiritual high, but can never deliver the more radical, *transformational* [emphasis mine] power [they] hope for” (xxi). “Making disciples involves a total transformation of the heart and life that involves a righteousness that impacts not only individuals but families, communities and nations” (Engel and Dyrness 22). In order for the church to develop deeper and multiplying disciples, the church needs to take its cue from Christ himself. Jesus challenged those who follow him to love God with not only all of their minds, but their hearts and souls as well (Matt. 22:37).

The goal of the church of Jesus Christ is the transformation of people from self-centered to God-centered. Transformation is not about information acquisition. “To enter God’s kingdom is to come under the redemptive rule and reign of God. To be a part of God’s kingdom ... means we are being called to constant life change” (Cordeiro, Lewis, Bird 21). “The movement Jesus initiated had power because it had at its core a personal life-transforming experience.... This is the dynamic of genuine Christianity. This is what turned the world upside down at the beginning of the Christian era” (McNeal 17). Jesus said if anyone would follow him, “let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, he is the one who will save it” (Luke 9:23-24). Paul celebrated the natural

outflow of that surrender when he said, “Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor. 5:17, NAS). Christ came so those who walk in darkness might see a great light (Matt. 4:16), and they would in turn not only know about that light, become light to a lost world as well (Matt. 5:14).

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit gave Jesus’ ragtag group of beleaguered followers the power to be that great light to a lost world. Luke Timothy Johnson writes, “Luke’s point is not the pyrotechnics of theophany, but spiritual transformation. The real ‘event’ of Pentecost is the empowerment of the disciples by the Holy Spirit” (45). Those who claim to belong to Jesus Christ must exhibit a radical change inherent in a dynamic relationship with Christ. In his description of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Sam Shoemaker provides a glimpse of what a transformational community might look like when he states those who take part in AA are a society of the “before and after, with a clear line between the old life and the new.”

Without a “clear line between the old life and the new,” persons outside the church tend to see the professed core values—regardless of how well they are articulated—as little more than white-washed tombs. The outside looks good, the mission statements are catchy, there may be grand talk of transformation, but upon closer inspection, the inside contains little more than dead men’s bones. When the church is built on the solid foundation of God’s love and grace in Jesus Christ, not only will there be nothing that can stand against it—including the gates of hell (Matt. 16:18), but it will be able to accomplish the tasks to which the Spirit leads it.

A Healthy Pentecost

Part of the solution for both the malaise of the plateau church and planting healthy new churches is the universal Church's need for a healthy Pentecost. A new, powerful, and healthy infusion of the Holy Spirit would produce a Spirit-empowered blood flow throughout the body, ultimately leading to healthy structures, values, and ministry (Cantalamessa, *Come, Creator* 129). Ray C. Stedman writes about the indwelling of the Spirit:

Jesus points out [in Acts 1] that this indwelling is not a *ritual* [original emphasis] but a *reality*, [original emphasis] not a *program* [original emphasis] but *power* [original emphasis]. The eleven disciples said to Jesus, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?" They were thinking in terms of timetables, schedules, and programs. And the church throughout its history has often made this same mistake. But the Lord Jesus said, "That is not for you to know. Times, schedules, and programming are all in the Father's authority. Your task is to be the manifestation of power; the Father will take care of the program. You content yourselves with exercising the power that is given to you, and the Father will put it all together." (20)

All too often, when Pentecost is referenced in the context of church planting or church health, well-intentioned Christians become fixated on the elements of the early church listed in Acts 2:42-47. Eager church leaders assume if a church—existing or planting—can duplicate being “devoted to the disciples’ teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42), making disciples of Christ, as well as apostolic ministry, would be the inevitable outcome. However, Joel Green suggests Luke’s listing of the attributes of the first-century church was more representational of what had gone before than the listing was prescriptive of a definitive structure for the body of Christ. Green says, “[T]his [summary] serves the important, dual function of exhibiting the communal dimension of the consequences of the outpouring of the Spirit and

demonstrating the quality of daily life among those who are baptized in the name of the Jesus Christ” (*Acts* 30). The elements listed in *Acts* 2:42-47 were at one and the same time the result of the Pentecost outpouring of the Holy Spirit and Luke’s observation of the disciplines of the early church which helped to keep the community of faith in communion with that same Spirit.

Neither these elements nor any other listing of spiritual disciplines should be considered the definitive tools for receiving the Holy Spirit. Charles H. Talbert says, “There is no clear-cut theological or ecclesiastical pattern of how and when the Spirit can be expected to be given in Luke-Acts” (47). Likewise, Beverly Gaventa states that just as one cannot assume—based on *Acts* 2:38—that receiving the Holy Spirit is the inevitable outcome of baptism, Luke-Acts does not suggest any definite “formulaic” method for experiencing the Holy Spirit (80). Nevertheless, the church must encounter the Holy Spirit if the church hopes to ever be obedient to the call of Christ.

Regarding the necessity of the Holy Spirit above and beyond all structural models Green says, “[T]he miraculous was performed not ‘by’ but ‘through’ the apostles; standing behind them is the Lord” (*Acts* 32). Jim Cymbala says, “The work of God is not by might of men or by the power of men but by his Spirit” (18). Charles Haddon Spurgeon says, “Without the Spirit of God we can do nothing. We are as ships without wind or chariots without steeds. Like branches without sap, we are withered. Like coals without fire, we are useless” (102). Cymbala succinctly states the necessity for the Holy Spirit:

Christianity is hopeless without [the Holy Spirit]. The church cannot be the church without the Holy Spirit abiding and empowering it. The degree to which we understand *and* experience the Spirit of God will be the exact degree to which God’s plan for our churches will be accomplished. (24)

Jesus was correct; the church will receive power to be his witnesses when they finally have a life-transforming experience with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8).

The book of Acts is not simply an account of the disciples finding the appropriate structure—Acts 2:42-47—and then building the church. The book of Acts is the beginning of Christ's declaration, "On this rock *I* [emphasis mine] will build my church" (Matt. 16:18), and the fulfillment of Christ's promise, "[Y]ou will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you" (Acts 1:8). John R. W. Stott rightly states that the church exists for Jesus and by Jesus:

The Lord himself (that is, Jesus) did it: *the Lord* added to their number [Acts 2:47]. Doubtless he did it through the preaching of the apostles, the witness of church members, the impressive love of their common life, and their example as they were praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people (47). Yet *he* did it. For he is the head of the church. He alone has the prerogative to admit people into its membership and to bestow salvation from his throne. (*Message* 86)

Jesus created, sustains, and will grow the church through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

If, as Cantalamessa says, the church needs a "healthy Pentecost," and if by that Cantalamessa means the church needs to receive the Holy Spirit, then the church must become receptive to the Holy Spirit (129). Similarly, if in Acts 2:42-47 Luke is describing the manifestation of the Holy Spirit through the community of believers, the implication is at some point prior to that, the new community was receptive to the Holy Spirit. Matthew and Acts contain two of the most pronounced receptivity points in the New Testament. At the close of Matthew, Jesus commissions the disciples to reach the world with the gospel. No wonder they were willing to wait in Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 1). The second receptivity point followed Peter's Pentecost

address. Those listening to Peter's testimony concerning Christ were "cut to the heart" and responded by asking, "Brothers, what shall we do (Acts 2:37). Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). In both of these instances Luke offers a glimpse into an aspect of what it means to be receptive to the Holy Spirit.

On the day of Pentecost, when Peter stood to speak, he declared the truth of the gospel of Christ. James Montgomery Boise says, "Whenever you find men and women being pointed to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, however or wherever that may happen, there the Holy Spirit is at work" (51). Boise goes on to point out that in just a few sentences Peter manages to expound on a significant amount of Jesus' ministry. Peter mentions Jesus' ministry, crucifixion, burial, resurrection, ascension, and present ministry (51). Though Luke does not elaborate in Acts 2:42 about the specifics of the teachings to which the early church "devoted themselves" (Green, *Acts* 32); nonetheless, John Phillips is correct when he says, "[The infant church] was marked by *the truth* [emphasis mine]" (61). The truth of Christ initially "cut to the heart" of those listening, and they devoted themselves to that same truth. The experience at Pentecost fulfilled Christ's earlier promise that God would send the Holy Spirit to remind the faithful of all Jesus had taught them (John 14:26).

The audience responded to the encounter with the truth of Christ with a motivating desire to experience God's forgiveness based on that truth. The account said, "They were cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37). Phillips writes about how, in the light of the truth of Christ, the Holy Spirit brings conviction:

Conviction is the Holy Spirit's first work in a human heart. He convicts of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment to come—of the nature of sin, of the need for righteousness, and of the nearness of judgment. He makes people see their personal accountability before God for what they have done, and particularly for their rejection of Christ. They become desperate about their lost condition. (55)

Because of the conviction in their hearts brought on by the Holy Spirit, they had a desperate desire to know the promise of a changed and forgiven life in relationship with the Christ of whom Peter spoke. Likewise, because it was the truth and promise of Christ that first opened their hearts, they did not seek to simply study that truth, but they took a concrete step to place themselves in a receptive situation (physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually) to experience that truth. Luke says they “*devoted* [emphasis mine] themselves to the disciple's teachings” (Acts 2:42). Their devotion was not simply a weekly Bible study where studious pupils dutifully learned and repeated biblical information. They “devoted” themselves to the teachings. The Greek word, *proskartereo*, connotes a concrete action undergirded by a sense of urgent clinging. The hearts of those in the early church hungered for more of the truth they tasted when Peter first proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ. The truth of Christ was a necessary element to their initial salvation, and they wanted and needed more.

To the crowd's question of “what shall do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:37-38). Peter was calling them to a significant sacrifice. Phillips points out that in calling the people to repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus, “Peter was re-communicating the truth that salvation and relationship with God is found only in Christ” (57). To repent, to turn around, “in the name of Jesus” (Acts 2:38) was to turn their backs on much of what they had valued up to that point in their lives. Regarding repentance, Gaventa says, “The

word [repentance] indicates a change of direction in a person's life rather than simply a mental change of attitude or a feeling of remorse; it signifies a turning away from a sinful and godless way of life" (80). True repentance is not an easy path. Repentance is a path that calls those who walk it to turn their backs on all they had once known and thought was of value and to live life in a new direction. To repent is to take seriously Jesus' words in Luke 9:23-24, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."

Peter called for both repentance and baptism. Like repentance, to be baptized in Christ's name was a bold and dramatic step, especially for the Jews. Marshall emphasizes that being baptized in Jesus' name conveyed that the person being baptized was entering into allegiance to Jesus (81). Being in allegiance with Jesus meant possible persecution. It meant the potential of being cut off from one's family and friends, and being denied a place of worship and significance in Jewish society (Phillips 61). Though the promise of the grace of God was being freely offered in Christ, Peter's call to repentance and baptism clearly stated that a relationship with God comes at a cost with regard to the things of this world. The constant reminder of the cost of full surrender was, and is, embodied in the experience of the Lord's Supper. Luke says, "They devoted themselves to the disciples' teaching, to the fellowship, to *the breaking of bread* [emphasis mine]" (Acts 2:42).

Some scholars debate whether "the breaking of bread" referred to the Lord's Supper or to a communal meal. Boise states that the reference refers to the Lord's Supper. Boise elaborates on the connection between Acts 2:42 and Acts 2:46:

“[N]ot only did the Christians worship in a formal setting, perhaps in the large courtyard of the Gentiles, but *they worshipped informally as well* [original emphasis], as the very next phrase says: “They broke bread in their homes” (v. 46). That is a deliberate repetition. Verse 42 says, “They devoted themselves . . . to the breaking of bread.” Then verse 46 says, “They broke bread in their homes.” It means that they did both. They had formal worship and they had informal worship. And the informal worship included, and perhaps was largely centered on, the communion service. (60)

Ben Witherington, III talks about Luke’s use of the term in both the books of Luke and

Acts:

Theophilus will already have heard about the Last Supper meal in the first volume, and perhaps more importantly about the recognition of Jesus at the breaking of the bread in the (for Luke) crucial Emmaus road resurrection appearance story (Luke 24:35), which suggests Luke emphasizes the connection between Jesus’ presence and such meals (cf. Luke 24:41-42; Acts 1:4; 10:41). Furthermore, texts like Acts 2:42, 46 and 20:7, 11 all suggest that this sort of breaking of bread was part of an act of worship that involved eating, praying, teaching, and singing in homes, to mention but a few elements of the service. On the whole, then, the phrase “the breaking of bread” seems to be a primitive way of alluding to the Lord’s Supper, though it cannot be ruled out that the reference is to an ordinary meal. (160)

Likewise, both Scott F. Spencer and Marshall suggest “the breaking of bread” is Luke’s utilization of a primitive term to describe the Lord’s Supper (Spencer 49; Marshall 83).

However, Spencer adds the caveat that the phrase “should not be limited to a purely liturgical setting” (49). In the regular act of the breaking of the bread, the early church was not only being reminded of Christ’s sacrifice and their need for repentance and forgiveness, but they were also experiencing a renewed and regular challenge to take up their own cross and die to self.

Peter promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to those who would repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:37). In this promise Peter declared they would be transformed. A transforming encounter with God through the Holy Spirit would lead to a

manifestation of not only some of the spiritual disciplines that perpetuated that receptivity (Acts 2:42), but also the manifestation of powerful signs, wonders, and workings of the Spirit in and through the early church (Acts 2:43-47). Phillips summarizes the connection of Acts 2:42-47:

The gift of the Holy Spirit is what makes it possible for the supernatural life of the Lord Jesus to be reproduced in us day by day. The Holy Spirit, with our cooperation, lives that life in us and through us. (59)

Dynamic Christian living is accomplished through a cooperative experience in the Holy Spirit. To the church at Laodicea, Jesus said that he stood at the door and knocked, if anyone would open the door, he would come in (Rev. 3:20). Paul encouraged the church at Philippi to “work out [their] own salvation” (Phil. 2:12). A significant part of God’s design is that those who seek to walk the narrow path do so by an intentionality of focus on God and a humble reliance on the movement of God.

One of the best examples of the cooperative nature of the Christian walk is the spiritual discipline of prayer. Luke concludes Acts 2:42 by saying, “[A]nd to prayer.” The early church prayed possibly because they experienced the essential realization that everything rested and relied on the movement of God’s mighty hand. Their devotion to prayer implied they recognized a desperate need for an ongoing encounter with the Holy Spirit. Lyle Wesley Dorsett supports the possible presence of this recognized need when he talks about the relationship between desire and prayer:

Desire gives fervor to prayer.... Strong desires make strong prayers.... The neglect of prayer is the fearful token of dead spiritual desires. The soul has turned away from God when desire after him no longer presses it into the closet. There can be no true praying without desire. (34)

When the spiritual seeker finally recognizes their need for God, the individual finally seeks, through prayer, the involvement of the Spirit of God.

The transforming experience of God, first and foremost, formed the elements of the early church articulated by Luke in Acts 2:42. These elements in turn informed the values and manifested elements that would perpetuate that transformation. “Everyone [being] filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs [being] done by the apostles” (Acts 2:43) were evidences and manifestations of the fact God was already moving. The same can be said of “having everything in common” or “meeting together with glad and sincere hearts” (Acts 2:44-46); these were the resulting manifestations of intentional components that were first formed and informed by the heart and life-transforming work of the Holy Spirit. If the church of today is going to be faithful to the design of those first believers, it must also embrace the reality that Spirit-led transformation of heart, mind, and soul is a necessary and ongoing process throughout the life of the church.

Andy Stanley, Reggie Joiner, and Lane Jones emphasize the importance of the presence and power of God as the focus, initiator, and instigator of life transformation. They hold that though embracing specific practices and honoring a set of core values aids in the implementation and effectiveness of a church’s ministries, none of that is as important to the usefulness and success of a church as “being in sync with what God desires to do in [the] church” (67). However, to be able to be in sync with what God desires, a church has to be willing and able to set aside its own agenda and first seek God’s agenda. Dallas Willard points out that even if a church’s primary emphasis is loving its neighbors, if it has not sought to love God first and follow his design and desire for the church, the people will not be able to truly love as God alone could equip them to

love (26). Truly, one must seek first the kingdom of God, and all the other ministries will be added as well (Matt. 6:33).

Wagner gets right to the point about the importance of the spiritual battle each church is forced to fight:

I want to be among the first to applaud the practical, technical aspects of church growth. But I also want to be among the first to affirm as strongly as possible that all the technology, good as it may be, will never be utilized to its maximum potential in planting churches unless and until the spiritual battle is engaged and won.... Many of our technical church growth principles could be used to grow fast food restaurants or insurance companies or tire stores. These can succeed without prayer because they are human institutions. Churches cannot. Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18), and He is the only one who ultimately does it. We are instruments in His hands for the task, and therefore we must be in tune with what He is doing and how He wants it done if we hope to be useful and effective instruments. Knowing what God is doing is a spiritual activity. If the church we plant is not a divine institution, it is not the kind of church we want. (*Church* 46)

George Morris points out no matter how well a mission or ministry plan may be conceived, if not for the blessing and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, the end result will be, at best, only what human-made plans could attain. Regardless of how much money is spent, how many hours are dedicated to organization, or how many skilled volunteers a church might be able to acquire, the "reign of God will not be advanced unless and until all efforts are baptized in the Holy Spirit" (3). Greg Laurie writes about the church's ineffectiveness at reaching the world:

One key reason the church is not affecting the world today as it ought is that it is not relying on the Holy Spirit. Far too often we are relying on programs or on surveys and entertainment. We are relying on other means instead of depending on the Holy Spirit to do His work.... We can't turn this world upside down on our own power. (28)

The result of ministries not empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit is failure, or worse, success that stems from and leads to self-sufficiency.

Jesus knew the disciples would not be able to accomplish the Great Commission on their own power. Because of this fact, after his ascension, Jesus did not command the disciples to get busy, but to wait for the Spirit to equip them for the task. He promised if they waited, the Spirit would give them the power to be his witnesses locally and globally. The same admonition holds for the church today. Only when the church realizes it is not in charge but fully dependent on the movement of God will it wait.

The church's continued misplacement of hope in human techniques and methodologies is one possible impediment to the acceptance of this reality. Stetzer points out a "lack of theological depth in many contemporary church-planting and church-growth movements because they emphasize technique, paradigms, and methodologies rather than genuine biblical and missiological principles" (23). A. W. Tozer adamantly proclaimed a church could increase its attendance and provide everything those in American society love and desire, but if the church did not "have the Holy Spirit, you might as well have nothing at all" (45). The biblical reality is that regardless of a church's structures, without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, the church has no power and will have little eternal effect.

Spiritual Formation: Being Receptive to the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the driving and equipping force of the church. The Holy Spirit is that which utilizes and informs structures, and energizes ministry. "The only hope for new life in any congregation is a massive infusion of the power and presence of the Spirit of God" (Harnish 29). Some facilitating experience must be present in order to intentionally usher the heart, mind, and soul of the individual believer, as well as the whole body of Christ, toward a more pronounced receptivity to the filling of the Holy

Spirit. Wagner states, “Our responsibility is to humble ourselves before [God’s] sovereign authority, to determine not to quench him, but to allow him his freedom. For then our churches will again manifest those marks of the Spirit’s presence” (*Spreading the Power* 87).

Intentional spiritual formation, implemented throughout every aspect of individual and corporate church life, is the humbling process that allows God’s freedom to produce lives of radical transformation and, consequently, God-centered values, structures, and ministries. Spiritual formation is the process through which the Holy Spirit transforms persons into Christ’s likeness and image (Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning* 80). If the church needs the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, and spiritual formation is one of the principal means of continually experiencing the Spirit’s movement, then in light of the 85 percent of North America churches in decline, as well as the 80 percent of church plants failures, one may safely assume that church plants, as well as existing churches, are lacking vital spiritual formation.

In support of the possible deficiency of vital spiritual formation in the church, Willard points out how infrequently discipleship is discussed:

Non-discipleship is the elephant in the church. It is not the much discussed moral failures, financial abuses, or the amazing general similarity between Christians and non-Christians. These are only effects of the underlying problem. The fundamental negative reality among Christian believers now is their failure to be constantly learning how to live their lives in the Kingdom Among Us. And it is an *accepted* [original emphasis] reality. The division of professing Christians into those for whom it is a matter of whole-life devotion to God and those who maintain a consumer or client relationship to the church has now been an accepted reality for over fifteen hundred years. (301)

McNeal cited studies where growing numbers of people are leaving the church precisely because the focus has been activities and involvement to the neglect of spiritual

formation. (4). Willard adds support to the need for an intentional effort in spiritual formation:

It is clear that a pervasive intention to make disciples would radically change the character of the church, the “visible” people of God, as we know it. Just a strong minority of genuine disciples in the membership of a congregation or group would have an incredibly transforming effect. Almost every problem that we see afflicting, paralyzing, and even killing Christians and groups of Christians today would never even arise in a context where the primacy of apprenticeship to Jesus is accepted and developed through a corresponding course of training. (304)

Stetzer asserts churches tend to convince themselves they are healthy if they have large attendance. Often these churches, in order to maintain their large attendance, will jettison intentional disciple making or spiritual formation because it adds undue pressure to already over-scheduled families. Because the perceptions and opinions of participants are high in regard to these churches, the leadership acquires a false sense of security and an unhealthy concept of what is an effective church. The trend continues until the most important consideration is what will keep warm bodies in the pews (24). The problem with that mind-set is the purpose of the church is not to provide a place of entertainment on Sunday morning but to make disciples for Jesus Christ.

“It is time,” declare Rainer and Geiger, “to design and implement a simple process that moves people toward spiritual transformation” (228). However, spiritual formation cannot and should not be segregated as a program, elevated to the position of foundation, or, as many have done, relegated to another structural element of the church. Rather, spiritual formation is the blood that flows throughout the entire body of the church. Spiritual formation is the intentional and organized process by which the leadership, the members, and the body as a whole are constantly being ushered into the presence of God so as to allow the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to have his way.

Spiritual formation is the ongoing infusion of the blood of the Lamb that keeps every aspect of the body of Christ, values, structures, methods, and ministries, constantly pressing “on to take hold of that which Christ Jesus took hold of [the people of the church]” (Phil. 3:12). However, just as multiple definitions for spiritual formation are available, multiple methodologies for implementing intentional spiritual formation throughout the body of Christ also exist. The purpose of this project is to research a specific set of spiritual formation emphases as viable tools toward Holy Spirit receptivity among the participants in a church plant and the consequent effect on church health and growth. These seven spiritual formation emphases (SFE) are as follows:

1. The *truths* of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,
2. The *desire* to experience the truths of Christ in one’s life,
3. The *sacrifice/cost* implicit in experiencing the truth,
4. The *promise* inherent in every truth of the gospel.
5. The *step* necessary to make oneself receptive to the truth.
6. The *transformation* of heart, mind, and life implicit in the truth.
7. The *manifestation* or *fruit* consequent to transformation.

Introduction to Spiritual Formation Emphases

This specific grouping of the seven spiritual formation emphases was not found in any researched literature. Rather, these seven SFE were the result of Bible study, literature review, personal reflection, and cumulative discernment over the past twenty-four years of ministry. Though the author of Acts does not mention the seven SFE by name, Acts 2:37-47 seems to encompass the seven SFE as both disciplines of healthy spiritual formation, as well as responses to an experience of the Holy Spirit. In Peter’s

Pentecost sermon, he proclaims an aspect of the *truth* of the gospel. That truth cut to the heart of the people and they *desired* to know what *steps* they needed to take in order to experience the *promise* of salvation. They took the steps to repent, be baptized, and devote themselves to some of the disciplines of the faith. They made the *sacrifice* of leaving behind their old lives, and despite the possible negative ramifications, publically declared their allegiance to Christ. Their hearts and lives became *transformed* and receptive vessels to the Holy Spirit, and the *manifestation*, the *fruit*, of that transformation was “many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles ... and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:43, 47).

This project hypothesized that an intentional focus on these seven SFE would result in a deeper, healthier, and more vital relationship with Jesus Christ as the Spirit continues to transform receptive persons into the likeness of Christ. However, this transformation is not instantaneous, but gradual and incremental. Paul said, “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Phil. 3:12). The incremental transformation of a person is not a conversion to the entirety of the truth of the gospel of Christ. One might be converted to the truth of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, or one’s need to experience the forgiveness for one’s sins through the sacrifice of Christ. Even those life altering truths are only a small percentage of Gospel truths waiting to be discovered. Jesus alluded to this incremental process when he said, “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth” (John 16:12-13).

Holy Spirit-inspired fruit is the result of genuine transformation. Genuine transformation is the result of an incremental and lifelong exposure to and encounter with the infinite truths of the gospel of Christ. For example, possibly years after one's conversion experience, one may finally encounter the truth that followers of Christ are called to be proclaimers of Christ. The person could have been casually reading the Bible and happened upon Matthew 28:19, "[G]o and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The reader's initial response might be a sense of longing to take part in something larger than oneself. However, the person's first reaction may be one of fear; the seeker may have realized the call to make disciples carries with it numerous sacrifices to comfort, security, and possibly even physical safety. If one sees the costs as too high, one would be less likely to desire that costly truth becoming a reality in one's life.

The counterbalance to the cost of any truth is the implied or stated promise of that same truth. One of the promises of Matthew 28:19 is verse 20, "and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." The promise is where God calls a person, the Spirit will equip him. However, the actual promise of the verse is not only that one will be able to be obedient, rather one will be a part of other's lives being reached for Christ; of helping to set the captives free; of taking part in something larger and more eternal than oneself. If an honest encounter with the promises of the truth outweighs the costs, then the potential for an increase in the desire to see that truth becomes a reality in one's life.

Once even a remote sense of wanting to experience a truth begins to surface, a response to that burgeoning desire is to take an intentional step toward making oneself more receptive to experiencing that truth. In the case of evangelism or sharing one's faith,

one can comfortably sit in the safety of a Christian small group and talk about the need or even the desire to reach out to the lost. Until one takes the step to actually meet or get to know a nonbeliever, the possibility of becoming a maker of disciples is unlikely. The step element of the SFE is an intentional movement from truth being solely theoretical in nature to it becoming more of a reality in one's life due to one making oneself available to the Holy Spirit.

The goal is as believers continue to faithfully encounter these SFE, their hearts are being prepared for a permanent transformation that leads to dynamic fruit of the Spirit. Regarding the call to evangelism, the actual act of sharing one's faith with someone else is the fruit of a heart transformation that preceded it. To bear the fruit of evangelism faithfully and boldly, one must first have a transformation of the heart that is broken for the lost; knowledge that Christ is the one who does the "saving," and a peace that Jesus *is* with you even until the end of time. Boldness and passion born out of that transformation—to name only a few—is what leads to the fruit of evangelism and outreach. Though the literature review did not reveal this specific suggested grouping of the seven suggested SFE, the literature did emphasize the presence and influence of each in the spiritual formation process.

The Truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Truth is of paramount importance in regard to Christian spiritual formation. Hunter refers to truth as "one source in Christian conversion" (*Radical Outreach* 182). He says of truth, "[It] has its own kind of power. New converts typically report one to several ideas, truths, or texts, spoke to them deeply and would not leave their consciousness" (182). John Burke shares the challenging statement that "truth has gone

relative” (193) for many in the postmodern culture. Burke cites a Barna Research survey that revealed only “one-third of Americans believe moral truth is absolute and unchanging” (193). Though the Barna research may be fair representation, for the purposes of this project, the Bible will be the source of authority for any concepts put forth as truth.

Thomas Cranmer once described Scripture as the “fountain and well of truth” (1). Jesus clearly stated in John 17:17, “[Y]our word is truth.” The probability that many Christian organizations have neglected the Word of God has greatly influenced the decline and disappearance of many of those institutions. Morris confirms the possible neglect of the Word of God when he states, “[A] church, a denomination or a missionary movement loses its first love and becomes fallen when it allows the following to happen: When it relaxes its commitment to the authority and primary of scriptures” (4). Cordeiro, Lewis, and Bird adamantly state, “Without a biblical basis anchoring it to kingdom values, any church is likely to hit trouble. It’s so easy to drift (Heb. 2:1) or delude ourselves (2 Cor. 11:3) as church leaders, and even with the best of intentions we might move toward darkness rather than light” (18).

If the Word of God is kept at the forefront of any search for truth, transforming light will be the inevitable reality. The psalmist says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Ps. 119:105). The writer of Hebrews says, “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). Stetzer proclaims, “The Scriptures are given not only

for information but also for transformation” (269). A genuine encounter with the Word of God is necessary to have a genuine people of God.

However, many in and outside the church might find themselves echoing Pilate’s question of Jesus, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). Some might suggest that every word from the Bible should be followed verbatim as the ultimate truth of God. However, if that were the case, some of the Old Testament passages would be somewhat problematic today. Few Christians are likely to embrace the admonition to not wear clothing woven with two kinds of materials (Lev. 19:19). Few church architects are apt to build churches without steps to the altar of God lest someone see one’s nakedness (Exod. 20:26). Jesus challenged the Deuteronomic command, “Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (Deut. 19:21) by saying, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person” (Matt. 5:38-39).

Some might suggest the New Testament offers the ultimate truth. Jesus said, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). However, once again, in the words of Pilate, “What is the truth?” (John 18:38). In his book, C. H. Dodd attempts to differentiate between the teachings, the *didache*, of the gospel of Christ and the proclaimed Good News of Jesus, the *kerygma*. Even Dodd admits, “We have to enquire how far it is possible to discover the actual content of the Gospel preached or proclaimed by the apostles” (1). Within the confines and extent of this study, one can not articulate the full essence of the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As noted in Chapter 1, this study defines truth as, “Any biblical truth related to being in a living relationship with God through Jesus Christ.” However, for the sake of clarification, a few of the significant

aspects of the truth of the gospel of Jesus are: The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the love and grace of God in Christ.

Birth, Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus

Stetzer proclaims the importance of the declaration of Christ's life, death and resurrection:

Lost persons can be found only by preaching repentance and forgiveness, the message of every genuine messenger of the gospel.... Jesus' command to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins rested upon his resurrection. This is the content of the commission.... Church planting and church growth are rightfully subject to criticism when the content of the message is not Christ and Christ crucified, when the preaching is more opinion than proclamation of God's Word (41)

Stetzer goes on to say in relation to the cross that "the most biblical church is the one in which the cross is the only stumbling block for the unchurched" (42). For other Christian thinkers the necessity of the cross as a part of the biblical triad for salvation is what gives the cross its power and influence. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were fulfillments of prophecy. This was the basis of Peter's message" (43). Stedman insists "the marvelous fact of the resurrection of Jesus is the bedrock upon which all Christian faith ultimately rests" (16). Marshall gives a summational statement of the truth when he talks about the message of Acts:

The *message* [original emphasis] which was proclaimed is expounded in a series of public addresses scattered throughout the book [of Acts]. Broadly speaking, it was concerned with the fact that Jesus, who had been raised from the dead by God after being put to death by the Jews, had been declared to be the Jewish Messiah and the Lord, and hence the source of salvation. It was through him that forgiveness of sins was offered to men, and it was from him that the gift of the Spirit had come down to the church.... It is thus the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus which stands at the center of the preaching in Acts. (25)

Without the assertion of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection, the Good News does not exist. The writer of John said, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). If the truth of Jesus were removed from the story of God's love, that word would lose its flesh and its ability to embrace those who are broken and lost in sin.

Love and Grace

God's love and grace toward humanity is another prominent theme of the transforming message of truth of Jesus Christ. Cantalamessa states, "The work of salvation rests on the sure foundation of God's gratuitous love" (*Mystery* 68).

Cantalamessa stresses the importance of "God's gratuitous love" being the foundation of salvation because it offers humanity the freedom to approach God because God has first approached humanity (68). John says, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). One is able to love one's neighbor as oneself because God first loved. Augustine of Hippo spoke about what fills God's heart:

God has spoken to us, in Scripture, about what fills his heart, and what fills his heart is love. All the Scriptures were written for this purpose: that human beings might grasp how much God loves them and grasp it so as to become inflamed with love for him. (319)

Without the truth and the experience of God's love, loving others is not possible. One is not able to give away what one has never possessed. Hence, if one ever hopes to give love, whether that love is given back to God or to another, one first has to receive the love of God.

Stott cautions against the tendency of many authors, preachers, and Christians to focus exclusively on the more palatable and acceptable elements of the gospel:

[M]any people are rejecting our gospel today not because they perceive it to be false, but because they perceive it to be trivial. We learn from Paul that we cannot preach the gospel of Jesus without the doctrine of God, or the cross without the creation, or salvation without judgment. (*The Message* 292)

Stott's point is that, in an effort to make the gospel more palatable, some have neglected the weightier elements of the gospel, such as judgment and the necessity of the cross. The message of God's love is an important message and the foundation of the good news. However, the spectrum of God's love also encompasses the weightier and more challenging aspects of the gospel. The writer of Hebrews says, "[T]he Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son" (12:6).

Other truths of the gospel of Christ include—but are not limited to—the kingdom of God, the hope of salvation, and the adoption of persons into the family of God. The cornerstone of Christ's teaching was, "The kingdom of God is at hand" (Matt. 10:7). In Mark 1:15, Jesus said, "Repent and believe in the gospel." Regarding the kingdom of God, Cantalamessa states, "The same nucleus ... is to be found after Pentecost, in the preaching of the apostles, but in this new form: 'God has made Jesus both Lord and Messiah. Repent and believe' (Acts 2:36, 38; 3:18f; 5:31)" (*Mystery* 36). Just as the disciples repeated the message of Jesus to anyone who would listen, Paul took the hope of the message of Jesus everywhere he went: "We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2). Erwin McManus strongly proclaims the message of hope as an essential element in the gospel when he says, "The gospel, in its essence, is a message of hope to a world full of despair" (*Unstoppable Force* 162).

The truth of the gospel of Christ is too extensive to encapsulate in printed form. A large majority of the literature reviewed summarized the fullness of the life-transforming

truth of the gospel as simply the person of Jesus Christ. “Whenever the Apostle wants to sum up the content of Christian preaching in a single word, the word is invariably the same one; it is a person, Jesus Christ” (Cantalamessa, *Mystery* 36). The truth is not about Jesus; the truth *is* Jesus. Regarding Jesus, the writer of the book of John states, “[T]he Law was given through Moses; grace and *truth* [emphasis mine] were realized through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). Jesus himself said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (John 14:6). Neighbour talks about the apostles’ doctrine centering on Christ:

It magnified Christ. It declared that Christ was Virgin-Born, and holy in life, and substitutionary in His death. It declared that Christ was God the Son: that He rose from the dead; that He ascended up on high; and that He is coming to judge the world in righteousness. Luke prefaced his Gospel by saying that he had taken in hand to set forth in order “a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us.” This declaration included all we have just now suggested, and it was in *truth* [emphasis mine]. (273)

Cantalamessa holds that “human beings are not converted by having truths *about* [emphasis mine] Jesus presented to them but by having Jesus himself presented to them” (*Mystery* 43). Chambers states this point succinctly, “We lose power if we do not concentrate on the right thing. The effect of the Cross is salvation, sanctification, healing, etc., but we are not to preach any of these; we are to preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (246). In many ways, the postmodern world is asking the Church to preach and live out the essence of the gospel; they want to see Jesus. They do not simply want to hear more truths about what could otherwise be a historic figure. They often want tangible evidence that Christ affects lives today. In Christ, humanity finds forgiveness. In Christ, everything old is made new. In Christ, one can come before the Father and be in relationship. One can be made clean and be used in ministry through the empowering of

the Holy Spirit to reach a lost world because of Christ. Christ makes the vessel clean while the Spirit fills the vessel so the fruits of God can flow from the life of the believer.

The Good News

The truth as communicated in the person of Jesus is not always good news as the American culture may currently define it. In fact, the challenging implications of the gospel often play a significant role in persons not desiring to experience Christ because of their unwillingness to bear the costs implicit in an experience of that truth. Laurie points out the truths of the Bible will lead seekers to “spiritual health,” but the Bible leads them there through some of the hard realities of their sinfulness, their brokenness, their inadequacies, their need for forgiveness and transformation. He says, “It’s not just a feel-good-about-yourself book. Most of the time, Jesus [is] trying to get people to wake up to what *isn’t* [original emphasis] good—so that healing can begin” (166). Laurie goes on to point out a sad reality about the Church’s attempt at being inoffensive:

Sometimes a church tries so hard not to be offensive or confrontational that the gospel message is not preached in its entirety. I’m totally in favor of meeting people with Christ’s message in creative ways. But this should work to strengthen the gospel’s impact, not obscure it. If people walk away having a good feeling but no idea who Jesus is, we’ve really missed the boat. (50)

The whole of the gospel needs to be proclaimed. Sometimes that “whole” is an emphasis on the *hole* in the soul of the seeker so that the seeker can ultimately find healing.

The Holy Spirit and Truth

The Holy Spirit is the one who brings persons to a point of recognizing the holes in their souls and the truths that will heal them. Jesus referred to the Spirit as “the Spirit of truth” (John 14:17). In the same chapter, John records Jesus saying, “the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of

everything I have said to you” (John 14:26). Just as Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit of God brings those who are asking, seeking, and knocking to an insight and experience of the Word of God (Stott, *Message* 82). Tozer says no one can know the things of God except through the power of the Holy Spirit (32). Lloyd-Jones emphasizes the importance of the Spirit in recognizing the truth:

Each of us becomes a Christian when the Spirit of God comes in power and brings the truth home, especially the truth about this person, Jesus of Nazareth. Then we see what He means to us, and we turn to Him in utter, absolute submission. We confess our sin and failure and inability, and with a simple, child-like belief we accept the message concerning Him. (62)

The Spirit offers the first whisper, creates the yearning in the heart, and guides the seeker to seek and knock at the appropriate doors. The Spirit answers and instructs. Without the Spirit of God, no people of God would exist.

A Life That Desires God

Having emphasized the necessity of truth in the process of spiritual formation, one needs to note just as “man does not live on bread alone” (Matt. 4:4a), so a person’s life is not necessarily transformed only by “every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4b). Truth, apart from a receptive heart, cannot bring about salvation or transformation. One of the greatest evangelists to walk the face of the earth, the apostle Paul, shared the truth of the gospel of Christ with the people of Athens. Their responses ranged from resentment, to amusement and curiosity: “When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on this subject’” (Acts 17:32). Robinson and Wall point out that the Athenians were “certainly polite, but not interested—not in repentance or new life” (226). They

were interested in theorizing about ideas but not in being made new. Without genuine desire, the outcome is often intriguing dialogue at best.

Despite the shortcomings of mere information transmission, churches all too often relegate the whole of spiritual formation to that format. McNeal talks about the primary focus of Christian teaching:

We have turned our churches into groups of people who are studying God as though they were taking a course at school or attending a business seminar. We aim at the head.... And we wonder why there is no passion for Jesus and his mission (70)

If the church's aiming at the head is the case, then Christian leaders need to seek to discover what takes an individual past simple head knowledge toward a receptivity that leads to transformation by the power of the Spirit. McManus suggests a teachable heart as one aspect leading persons toward receptivity:

A person of integrity is a person of truth. Yet truth itself is not what forms integrity; rather, it's what *informs* [emphasis mine] integrity. Only the teachable heart will embrace whatever truth is needed for the moment. If we are not teachable, there will be no transformation. If we are unwilling to listen, we are incapable of learning.... And while intelligence, discipline, focus, and determination are all critical to the learning process, another characteristic is even more essential: humility. (*Stand against the Wind* 31)

Humility is often the realization that one has a need in one's life that cannot be met without the assistance of something greater than oneself. The antithesis to wisdom (the recognition that one does not know everything) and humility is foolishness and arrogance. The arrogant fool never seeks help because the fool is too foolish to recognize the need.

Chambers contends that there must be a need for the message of Christ before there is a use for the message of Christ (263). Dan B. Allender echoes this and asserts the message generates the need:

The love of truth creates a deep hunger and humility to eat and drink more truth.... [T]he more we partake of truth, the more we are drawn to hunger for the kind of relationships that are marked by a passionate love of God. (121)

The desire is a passionate yearning to know and experience the reality of some aspect of the truth of God in Jesus Christ. The idea of desire is represented by Jesus' remarks in Matthew. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matt. 5:6). To hunger is to have a desperate yearning for an experience of God. The Lord said through the prophet Jeremiah, "you will seek me and find me, when you search for me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:12-13). A life-transforming desire is rooted in the reality that "every person has an essential emptiness within that only Christ can fill" (Laurie 79). The desire that leads to a life transformed by the Spirit is a desire that has God as its goal.

One of the first steps in John Wesley's process of evangelism was to "awaken people to the fact of their lostness, their sins, their need for God" (Hunter, *To Spread the Power* 57). Wesley discovered a correlation between the spiritual growth of a society and the depth of thirst and yearning expectation for the Holy Spirit (*Acts* 48). Deep desire and longing were central to early Methodist spirituality (Ruth 225). Green points out, "Healing is welcome only when illness is recognized. Only those who experience the pain of brokenness are likely to be hungry for 'restoration.'" (*Salvation* 49). Green goes on to say, "The gospel has little to offer people who refuse to admit need" (56). Humanity's difficulty with admitting its insufficiency one of the reasons Jesus said it was

“hard” for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Those who have a vast assortment of options to try before they finally turn to God, or those who exist behind a façade of self-sufficiency are less likely to turn to God until every option is taken away. Tozer writes extensively about the concept of persons needing to reach a certain level of receptivity before turning to the Spirit:

The reason [people are not] filled with the Spirit is because they have other things they want more. God does not come rushing into a human heart unless He knows that He is the answer and fulfillment to the greatest, most overpowering desire of that life. The desire to be filled must become all-absorbing in your life. If there is anything in your life bigger than your desire to be a Spirit-filled Christian, you will never be a Spirit-filled Christian until that is cured. (84)

Tozer admits part of the problem is that “we want the thrill of being full, but we don’t want to meet the conditions. We just don’t want to be filled badly enough to be filled” (79). Just as Jesus declared that the Father gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask (Luke 11:13), Tozer observes, “God, through His Holy Spirit, will be gentlemanly—He will not come in where He is not wanted” (81). Jesus states in Revelation, “I stand at the door and knock” (3:20). The implication is Jesus will never force a person to receive him. Christ is by the door, gently prodding through the Spirit, patiently waiting for each person to recognize their need, hear Christ’s voice, open the door, and receive him.

Brokenness

One of the main struggles of the church is to find a way to aid persons in reaching a point of desire that would make them open and receptive to a life-transforming movement of the Holy Spirit. Individuals must experience some level of brokenness in their own reliance on themselves so that they would in turn recognize a need for God’s presence and intervention in their lives. Robinson and Wall say, “Conversion often seems

to begin with something that looks like ‘breakdown.’ Breakdown precedes and may, in conversion, give way to a ‘breakthrough’” (143). Peter Scazzero says, “We change our behavior when the pain of staying the same becomes greater than the pain of changing. Through pain, we often develop a hunger for change” (75). The crucial issue is whether one’s “hunger for change” outweighs one’s hunger for comfort and familiarity; until the former surpasses the latter, one will not be truly open to the Spirit’s movement in one’s life.

Marshall references the experience of brokenness when he describes the crowd’s response to Peter’s sermon in Acts 2. Luke depicts the crowd as being “pierced to the heart,” asking Peter and the rest of the apostles what they should do (Acts 2:37; Marshall 80). The word *pierced* literally means “to be pricked violently.” Since their actions had brought about Christ’s death, they could not look to themselves for retribution. Hope had to be found elsewhere, in someone else.

Desperation to See God Move

If brokenness is one possible experience that might lead to a receptive desire for the Holy Spirit, desperation to see God move in powerful ways—dependent only on the power of the Holy Spirit—is certainly another. Unfortunately, many Christians never move beyond an understanding of God as a cosmic bellhop, waiting to make “the faithful” comfortable and blessed. That mind-set rarely—unless broken—lends itself to any desire to see anything radical or dramatic happen for God’s kingdom. Many want to simply go about their daily activities unhindered by any interference from the Holy Spirit. Bill Hybels remarks about the Christian’s tendency to live “sedated” lives:

[Satan] convinces mature believers that they should demonstrate their spiritual maturity by living serious, predictable, semi-sedated Christian

lives that attest to their “quiet consistency.” In short, he tries to dupe you into “mellowing out” and “settling in” to a powerless, watered-down, neutralized Christian existence. (131)

The church is either too content, with too many other options to try before eventually becoming hungry for God, or it has been wrongly convinced that dynamic Christianity and culture transforming movements of God are only for the fanatical.

Prayer: A Sign of Desire

Prayer is often an evidence of the desire of individuals and the church as a whole to have the Holy Spirit involved in transforming their lives. Prayer is the natural result of the realization that, “The church is called to live above her own ability. She is called to live on a plane so high that no human being can live like that of his own ability and power” (Tozer 70). Often the church prays when it finally hears the Spirit’s calling to live transformed lives that impact the world for Jesus Christ. When the body of Christ recognizes the magnitude of what the Spirit wants to achieve through it, the church eventually realizes its inability to carry out that calling on its own power. The church ultimately acknowledges “some other empowerment is needed; therefore, the church waits and prays” (Robinson and Wall 46). The disciples, for example, were willing to wait in earnest prayer, per Jesus’ instructions, because they were faced with the daunting task of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. They knew they were in over their heads, and they were desperate. They were hungry for something other than themselves that would supply the power they needed in order to accomplish the task before them. They knew they needed to “wait for the gift [the] Father promised”—the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). Hunter says of the disciples, “Only with their vision of God clarified, and

themselves humbled before him, were they ready at last to pray” (*To Spread the Power* 100).

People who live comfortable lives and who see the church as a social club with a steeple have trouble recognizing a need for an encounter with God. They are less likely to see the need for the Holy Spirit because they have little interest in fulfilling the call of Christ. The uninterested are not hungry for the truth, so they never open themselves up to the truth and the transforming work of God in their lives. The comfortable are secure and content to stay that way.

At some point on the path to genuine transformation, persons must honestly address how deeply they authentically desire to have an encounter with the living God based on an aspect of the truth inherent in the gospel of Christ. That truth might be anything from a first encounter with the love of God, to the reality of the Spirit yearning for one to press on to perfection in God’s love. Though he is speaking about the unchurched, Stetzer was correct regarding the realities concerning a person’s desire for God when he says, “Moving an unbeliever from felt needs to real needs happens by applying a relevant strategy to help unbelievers identify the true nature of their needs. It’s a process” (149). Just as the maturing and growth of the Christian is a process spanning a person’s entire life, so too is the specific experience of awakening or fanning into flame the desire along the way regarding any truth.

The Sacrifice/Cost Implicit in Experiencing Truth

The third SFE to be considered as an aspect of healthy spiritual formation is the consideration of a sacrificial cost implicit in experiencing any truth of the Christian life. Jesus summed up the concept of sacrifice as an element in a life-transforming encounter

with God when he said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it” (Luke 9:23-24). The call to follow Christ carries with it a call to take up a cross and the reality of potential suffering and pain. Jesus said, “In this world you *will* [emphasis mine] have trouble” (John 16:33). “[The] early Christians who scratched the sign of a cross on the walls of the catacombs alongside a crudely drawn fish knew about the Cross. And they knew something about the scandal of the Cross, from which we shrink” (Leadingham 28). The simple truth is “the Spirit will take us where we did not, on our own, plan to go, and will involve us in ministry that costs us something—perhaps even our lives” (Robinson and Wall 130).

McManus asks a crucial question about a person’s assumptions regarding the Christian life:

How could we ever think the Christian faith would be safe when its central metaphor is an instrument of death? It is not a coincidence that baptism is a water grave depicting death and resurrection. It is no less significant that the ongoing ordinance of the Lord’s Supper is a reminder of sacrifice. How did we ever develop a safe theology from such a dangerous faith? Scriptures are clear that safety is not the promise of faith. (*Unstoppable Force* 33)

McManus goes on to say, “[T]he center of God’s will is not a safe place but the most dangerous place in the world” (*Unstoppable Force* 32). Jesus was crucified; “his Church is persecuted; those who follow him are promised suffering, rejection and death” (Weston 64). Robinson and Wall simply state, “Conversion brings suffering!” (148). They go on to talk about the likely reality of suffering in every person’s Christian walk:

Sometimes today’s accounts of conversion seem to suggest, or say straightforwardly, that conversion to Christ will bring an end to suffering and trouble and will deliver prosperity, success, and status.... This is doubtless the experience of some and may very well express authentic

aspects of conversion. But even those who narrate such a story may go on, when pressed, to acknowledge that living a Christian life can bring suffering of its own.... Following Christ may mean sacrifice of time and money that is not always easy or understood by others. (148)

The Bible and Christian writers tend to be clear that following Christ faithfully may lead to suffering and discomfort.

McManus poses a very applicable question, “Is it possible that the transforming power of the church has been lost because we keep inviting people to step into the comfort, safety, and security of Jesus Christ?” (*Barbarian Way* 48). He proceeds to answer his own question, communicating clearly his disdain for how life in Christ has been diminished:

We have somehow perverted th[e] more primal understanding [of the Christian life] to a far more civilized one. Instead of finding confidence to live as we should regardless of our circumstances, we have used it as justification to choose the path of least resistance, least difficulty, least sacrifice. (44)

The result is “too much of mainline Protestantism is focused not upon conversion, but upon accommodation, adjustment, and the gospel reduced to the utterly conventional” (Willimon, *Pastor* 169). Because of the focus on accommodation, those very same mainline Protestant denominations and churches have either plateaued or declined.

Regarding the prevalence of an easy-gospel message, Stott was correct when he attested “the place of suffering in service and passion in mission is hardly ever taught today” (*Cross* 322). “Suffering” and “passion” are not taught because many are not interested in a difficult gospel. Good news is not viewed as good news if it entails any idea of suffering or possible cost. Stott continues regarding the outreach of the church being dependent on one’s willingness to suffer:

The greatest single secret of evangelistic or missionary effectiveness is the willingness to suffer and die. It may be a death to popularity (by faithfully

preaching the unpopular biblical gospel), or to pride (by the use of modest methods in reliance on the Holy Spirit), or to racial and national prejudice (by identification with another culture), or to material comfort (by adopting a simple lifestyle). But the servant must suffer ... to bring light to the nations, and the seed must die if it is to multiply.” (322)

Both the New Testament and Christian literature taut the prevalent theme that “when a person is called to be a Christian, that person is called to suffer” (Stedman 110).

Suffering is an inevitable and honest reality of the life of one who surrenders fully to Jesus Christ. In John 15:18-21, Jesus informs his followers they can expect persecution because he also experienced persecution. In Matthew 10:38-39, Mark 8:34-37, and Luke 9:23-25, Jesus clearly states suffering and bearing a cross are imperative parts of following him. Jesus predicted it, and the disciples and saints through the ages have been living and dying fulfillments of that prediction.

Some facets of the cost and sacrifice of following Christ relate to what lays ahead; others facets relate to what one may have to leave behind. Throughout the wilderness travels of the children of Israel, they clearly communicated their self-centered desire to return to Egypt (Num. 14:3-4). They complained they would rather have stayed in the Egypt they knew—regardless of the harsh and oppressive conditions—than risk the radical change of a “promised land.” Jesus had something similar in mind when he said, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

People may have heard the truth, they may have even felt a sense of yearning and desire to know more than the empty status quo in which they have acquiesced to live, but until they decide following Christ is more important than keeping their security or living

inside their comfort zone, they will never truly know the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus warned his followers they would be hated just as he was hated and persecuted just as he was persecuted (John 15:16). The greatest sacrifice inherent in the Christian walk is the call to die to oneself and to set aside one's own agenda, ego, and desires in order to be filled with God's agenda and desires. To die to self is being willing to go through the necessary refining fires in order to have the dross, sin, and cancers of one's soul burned away until one's life reflects the Master's. An unwillingness to take up the cross, make the necessary sacrifice, and die to self is one of the reasons why so many churches are dying in their stale self-centeredness, so many church plants never get beyond the desires of the core group, and so many lives never manifest anything more than socially acceptable morality. They have been unwilling to take up the cross, make the sacrifice that is necessary, and die to self. "We belong most fully to the one we call Lord only when he has permission to *crush* [emphasis mine] those parts of us that we have tried the hardest to keep under wraps" (McDonald 197). The ultimate cost of the gospel of Jesus Christ is his definitive call for his followers to die.

This radical concept of dying to oneself, of being "crushed," probably played a significant part in Peter's response to the crowd on the day of Pentecost. Their hearts had been "violently pricked" by Peter's words (Acts 2:37). They had heard the truth. They wanted to change. "What must we do?" (Acts 2:37) was their heart's cry. Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized" (Acts 2:38). He referred to an act of the will (repentance) and a representation of dying to self (baptism).

Tom Wright points out the significance of Peter's admonition to be baptized would not have been lost on the crowd. Wright states, "Without losing any of its Jewish connotations, the act of plunging someone under the water and bringing them up again on the other side spoke powerfully of dying to the old life and coming through into a new one" (30). Christ promises when individuals truly die to themselves, they finally find themselves (Luke 9:24). When one finally puts aside one's own goals and desires, God is able to reveal his goals and desires for that individual. When one dies to self, one truly finds one's life.

However, God is not a sadistic deity who enjoys the pain of others and so has integrated suffering into the transformation process. Rather, the simple reality is that adversity and loss frequently lead to deeper levels of maturity and depth. Scazzero points out how "people embrace grief as a way to become more like God. They understand grieving our losses [as being] critical in discipleship. It is *the* [original emphasis] only pathway to becoming compassionate like our Lord Jesus" (152). Gerald L. Sittser states regarding a more secular application, "Catastrophic loss by definition precludes recovery. It will transform us or destroy us, but it will never leave us the same. The soul is elastic, like a balloon. It can grow larger through suffering" (39). God is a realist who recognizes the fact that just as muscle is strengthened only as it encounters resistance, so too do people grow in strength and their relationship with God when their lives, and even their faiths, are met with resistance. God meets humanity at this point of reality because of his love for us not in spite of it.

The good news is God has promised to be with journeying Christians in the midst of any suffering and cost. The Bible promises that nothing can separate us from the

loving hand of God, even hardship and persecution (Rom. 8:37-38). The hope of the Word is even if a person walked “through the valley of the shadow of death,” that person would not have to fear evil because God was with him (Ps. 23:4) This truth does not remove them from danger and suffering, rather promises divine protection from their enemies in the midst of their suffering (Marshall 29). Morris speaks eloquently about the presence of Christ in the midst of suffering:

In my loneliness He is the Friend who never leaves or forsakes me. He is a friend who stays closer than a sister or brother. When I am victimized by principalities and powers, He is the Liberator who unmask the powers of darkness and breaks the iron curtains of oppression. When I face the desolation of death, Jesus Christ is the One who will take me by the hand and lead me through the valley of the shadow. He is the Lord of Life who triumphs over the night of death and shows me the victory of Easter morning. (4)

Though the good news of Jesus does entail a cross, it also entails a resurrection. God is the one who delivers the victory of Easter morning. He is the one who makes life from death, who gives sight to the blind, who sets the prisoner free, and who turns a blackened heart of hate into a vessel of love.

The Promise Inherent in Every Truth of the Gospel

The fourth SFE necessary toward a well-rounded foundation of spiritual formation is a realistic consideration of the promises inherent in every truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To consider only the costs of the Gospel truths while neglecting the promises would paint a depressingly negative and unrealistic picture of what it means to follow Christ. Likewise, emphasizing only the promises and disregarding the inevitable costs would be to proclaim a dishonest and shallow gospel. Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but

whoever loses his life for me will save it” (Luke 9:23-24). “Find” (promise) cannot come without “loss” (cost), and “deny himself” (cost) cannot come without a “follow me” (promise). James A. Harnish talks about the necessity of embracing both the inevitable cost and promise of the gospel:

To tremble in the darkness of Good Friday is to know that the place of pain is the place where God’s love is most fully and clearly made known. If we short-circuit, or deny the pain, we miss out on the deeper work of healing that the Spirit of God can do within and among us. If we bypass Good Friday, we never know the full joy of Easter morning. (188)

Every truth of the gospel carries with it both a cost and a promise. Resurrection can only follow sacrificial death. If new life is ever to be a reality, there has to be the death of the old life. If the Spirit is going to provide guidance, there has to be a surrender of one’s will. Radical transformation requires an equally radical and costly change. James suggests one should find it “pure joy” to experience suffering in one’s faith (Jas. 1:2). His reasoning is “because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (Jas. 1:3-4). Paul said to the church at Rome, “[W]e also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Rom. 5:3-5).

Cost and Promise are also uniquely united in their relationship within the seven SFE. Realistically speaking, if cost were the only aspect of the truth considered in spiritual formation, very few, if any would willingly chose to encounter the truth in a life-transforming way. If Jesus simply said, “You must lose your life,” without following the challenge with “in order to find your life,” fewer

would be apt to follow him. If Jesus would have extended the costly invitation to Peter and Andrew to “Come follow me,” without the promise “and I will make you fishers of men,” the two would most likely have remained in their comfortable, profitable, and familiar setting (Matt. 4:19). They would not have wanted to follow Jesus. In order for one to desire the transformation of a gospel truth, the inherent costs need to be outweighed, or at least counterbalanced by the asserted promises.

As Jesus stood on the Mount, he proclaimed, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven” (Matt. 5:10-12). In those few lines, he offered both the probable cost and the promised blessing. For those who were persecuted, he promised the kingdom of heaven. For those who were insulted for his name, he promised eternity. Dietrich Bonhoeffer paints a beautiful picture of that eternal blessing:

There shall the poor be seen in the halls of joy. With his own hand God wipes away the tears from the eyes of those who had mourned on earth. He feeds the hungry at his Banquet. There stand the scarred bodies of the martyrs, now glorified and clothed in the white robes of eternal righteousness instead of the rags of sin and repentance. (114)

However, one wonders if an eternal promise is sufficient enough motivation to foster a desire in the seeker’s soul for genuine transformation. Henry Cloud and John Townsend point out that to many people, obedience or righteous living means “to be deprived.” In light of Matthew 5:10-12, being deprived might mean being deprived of reputation, or safety, or even one’s life. Cloud and Townsend go on to say that many who turn their back on Christ do so because they do not see “any real benefit, except maybe in heaven”

(283). If Cloud and Townsend are correct, then the church desperately needs to emphasize the depth, power, and blessings of the promises of God.

McManus states the ultimate promise of God is that those who follow Christ would find “true greatness,” that at the end of their time on this earth, they would become like Christ. McManus goes on to say, “[O]ur greatest treasure will be the undeniable reality of Christ in us, the hope of glory” (*Uprising* 34). The writer of Lamentations declares, “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (Lam. 3:22-23).

Burke speaks about the unfathomable promise of growing in God’s love:

Honestly, I don’t think most people consider loving God a net gain in life. But if you ask them, “How would you like to experience such confidence that you almost never felt insecure? How would you like to have moments of feeling so loved by God you couldn’t contain it? How would you like to know God as a loving parent, a friend, an encourager? How would you like the peace of making decisions knowing your Creator cares for you and guides you?” Everyone wants that! Understanding how God loves us, internalizing his love by knowing him, catalyzes our lives for him. (112)

Harnish states that what keeps one moving forward when “human reality seems stacked against” the person is the confidence that “God will accomplish what God has promised. Harnish goes on to say, “It is faith that believes God is able to bring life out of death. It is a heart-level relationship with God that enables us to look the future in the face and say, Yes” (184). In Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth, he enthusiastically echoed Harnish’s sentiment, “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God” (2 Cor. 1:20).

Ultimately, however, each person must not only be informed of the promises of the Gospel’s truths, but embrace them as a legitimate result of allowing the Spirit to move

in and transform one's life. Burke states, "I am convinced that everyone would enjoy the life God intends for them—but until they believe that God's plan for them will fulfill them, and until they commit to becoming all God intended, they will stay stuck" (111). Hence, one goal of church leaders who are passionate about discipleship and spiritual formation is to help those under their leadership to believe, to believe in the promises, to enable them to hear God's, "Yes," in Christ.

The Step Toward Making Oneself Receptive to The Truth

The fifth SFE is taking a concrete step toward making oneself receptive to the transformation inherent in a gospel truth. When Jesus called Peter and Andrew to follow him, and offered them the promise of making them fishers of men, Jesus was also offering them a choice. They could have stayed on the shore discussing the dynamics of Jesus' invitation. They could have argued the definition of the meaning of being "fishers of men." The only way they were ultimately going to find out the legitimacy of the One who called, as well as the genuineness of the life to which he was calling them, was to leave their nets and follow. They chose to take a step.

In reference to God's call to Joshua to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land, McManus points out that God promised he would "give them the land, but they would have to take it. God would go *with* [original emphasis] them, but He would not go *for* [original emphasis] them" (*Uprising* 94). If the Israelites were to take possession of God's promise, they would have to play a part in the process. The same is true for the "promise land" of Spirit-empowered transformation; if one is to truly be remade in the image of Christ in light of the reality of a gospel truth, one must choose to take a step.

McManus says, “Transformation is both the miracle of God and the stewardship of man” (180). Cloud and Townsend drive home this reality when they say, “Most of the time, growth requires action. In only one period of our life can we be totally passive, receptive, and dependent, and that is in the womb” (336). If one truly wants to grow in one’s faith and walk with Christ, one has to take an active part in the process.

Bonhoeffer clearly states the need for an obedient step in the spiritual formation process:

Perhaps you still think you ought to think out beforehand and know what you ought to do. To that there is only one answer. You can only know and think about it by actually doing it. You can only learn what obedience is by obeying. It is no use asking questions; for it is only through obedience that you come to learn the truth. (78)

Burke asserts that the simple answer to spiritual growth is to “do life with God” (109).

Cloud and Townsend believe that when one takes an active part in one’s spiritual health, it tends to increase “the level of ownership [he has] in the process” (337). McManus adds to the urgency of faithfully taking ownership when he says, “The moment you know what God wants of you is the moment to do it” (100). McManus’ contention is the further in time one is removed from a Spirit-inspired insight or epiphany regarding a gospel truth, the more likely the revelation is to remain in the realm of the theoretical. Rarely does a truth that is not acted upon lead to a genuine transformation in one’s heart and life.

Bonhoeffer says, “The road to faith passes through obedience.... Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air, and if men imagine that they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves like fanatics” (63).

However, a distinction needs to be drawn between taking a step as a part of one’s spiritual formation process, and attempting to earn God’s favor through acts

of good works. The former is an intentional effort to put oneself in a position to experience the transformation of a gospel truth. The latter is a vain attempt to obtain something that was never meant to be earned. Taking the step of the SFE is moving the discussion of truth, hunger, cost, and promise from the realm of theory to the sphere of reality. Part of this process is accomplished by asking the question, “What can I do to make myself more available to the Spirit working in my life in light of the truth?” Just as the step of the SFE is not works righteousness, step is also not fruit. Fruit is the result of genuine transformation of the heart, mind, and life. Step is an intentional act that makes one receptive to transformation.

For example, while reading the Bible or listening to a sermon, the Spirit speaks to someone about his or her need to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others, (i.e., Matt. 28:19-20, the Great Commission). The person may have encountered the truth that God has given him grace that is to be freely given away (Matt. 10:80). However, the first thought that enters the person’s mind is the possibility of rejection—*cost*. The person asks, “Do I truly desire to have this truth radically transform me?” The Spirit reminds the person of the promise of the glorious possibility of him playing a part in someone knowing new life in Christ. The Spirit whispers in the person’s ear the reminder of the promise that in sharing faith, the person would grow in faith, and ultimately hear the words from the Father, “Well done my good and faithful servant.” However, if the revelation of the calling to share the good news remains only in the purview of one’s mind, one will never experience the promises and one’s heart will never be transformed. The person who desires to grow in his faith must take a step. The ultimate step would be to leave the safe confines of his personal sanctuary—physically, emotionally, and

spiritually—and begin to build relationships intentionally with nonbelievers. When one takes any of these steps, the seeker dramatically increases the possibility of having a radically transformed heart that begins to love the lost and trust the Spirit to supply where the Spirit calls. Sharing one's faith is the fruit. Step is moving beyond theory and contemplation to *some* action that makes oneself available to the Spirit.

Each step on each leg of each journey is different at different times for different people. Cloud and Townsend point out, “Obedience is not a ‘one size fits all’ proposition. God deals with us where we are and shows us our next step of growth” (286). Burke talks about the lack of “cookie-cutter” steps in Scripture:

If you study Scripture, you don't find one curriculum or seven easy steps or a program every person can follow toward growth. Why? Because growth is personal to each person. God is always trying to get our attention long enough to lead us down the path of growth, but the worries, the busyness, and the noise of life distract us. (109)

For example, when the rich ruler approached Jesus in Luke 18 and asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus first quizzed him on the commandments. After the man declared he had faithfully kept all of the commands, Jesus articulated the man's specific issue. In order for the man to experience genuine transformation, the step he needed to take was to set aside the wealth upon which he depended and trust God completely for his specific needs. The man's original question was, “How might I inherit eternal life?” The man sought the fruit of a relationship with God. In and of itself, selling his possessions was not a fruit of being in relationship with God. Selling his possessions was a step toward relinquishing the god he currently served. His unwillingness to take that step stymied all of his theoretical interest to that point.

The step the rich ruler had to take may not necessarily be the same step someone else needs to take. The specifics of one's needed step is dependent on the truth with which one wrestles. The step may be contingent on how far along in one's faith journey one might be. As illustrated earlier, the persons who are beginning to wrestle with the call to share their faith are unlikely to jump into street evangelism as their first steps. A legitimate step, worthy of celebration, may be the simple act of asking a fellow traveler to pray for courage for them to make the next step. If the Spirit is speaking to someone about their need for forgiveness of their sins, of repenting and experiencing new life in Christ, their step might be "confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (Jas. 5:16). If confessing one's sins is the truth about which one wrestles—challenged by the cost of vulnerability, but spurred on by the promise of being healed—then a step might be to privately acknowledge one's sin through journaling.

Just as no one spiritual formation plan fits everyone, the step aspect of the SFE is one of the most challenging facets of the spiritual formation process. Dennis F. Kinlaw writes about the necessity of this difficult process:

Following Jesus is not possible without hard work. It takes an intellectual shaping of our minds as well as a surrender of our will in order for us to be like Jesus. Christianity is not a matter of sitting around and waiting for inspiration.... It takes hard work in every area of life, and strenuous labor is what we shy away from. There is no magic in knowing Christ, and there is no shortcut. Believers must roll up their spiritual sleeves and tackle the task He has assigned to them to do. We certainly have divine help, but God will never do for us what is our responsibility to do. (November 7)

In order to have a greater possibility for genuine transformation, one needs to go through the difficult process of taking a concrete step.

Just as a concrete step is necessary for authentic transformation in an individual's life, a step is also necessary for authentic transformation in the life of the body of Christ.

Harnish points out that as the Spirit called Wesley to reach the lost with the gospel of Jesus, Wesley was faced with the taking a step, of making a choice despite his aversion to what he witnessed. Wesley recognized “the way [the] common people experienced the love of God in Christ” through Whitfield’s preaching in the open air meetings. Choosing to take a step Wesley wrote that he “‘consented to become more vile’ in order to share the love of God with everyone” (130). Harnish goes on to say, “The critical question confronting leaders in most mainline, long-established churches is how willing we are to change our methods in order to fulfill our mission” (130). If the church has any hope of faithfully fulfilling Christ’s commission to go into all the world and make disciples, it will need to take concrete steps to put itself in a more receptive position for not only its own transformation but its usefulness in the kingdom of God.

The Necessity for Creating a Culture of Vulnerability and Honesty

One suggested step the leadership of any church or small group might make in order to facilitate a genuine encounter of the truths of the Gospel is to create an ethos, or culture, that fosters the vulnerability and honesty necessary to embrace the challenges of the seven SFE. For example, few people will readily admit they do not fully desire to have the Holy Spirit take control of their lives. Few are willing to talk about the fears they may have of dying to self, or of having to relinquish a grudge they have held on to for years. Even fewer are apt to reveal their lack of belief when it comes to fully accepting the promises of God. In order for dynamic spiritual growth to occur based on an encounter with the seven SFE, persons have to feel free enough to admit and wrestle with these struggles. In general, the modern day American church does not readily embrace the type of honesty and vulnerability necessary for a productive encounter with

the seven SFE. A suggested starting point toward the necessary culture change of the church would be to move away from the mindset of the church as a museum for the saints, and adopting a mindset of the church as a “recovery group” for addicts.

To some degree or another, every person is addicted to something. Whether alcohol, narcotics or narcissism, something hinders everyone from hungering for an encounter with God. Until each person is able to admit their inability to manage life on their own—the first step in Alcoholics Anonymous—they are unlikely to acknowledge the need for anything other than themselves, desire a difference in their lives, and ultimately turn and know new life in Christ. The church needs to begin seeing itself as a group of sinners gathered together under the banner of their only hope, Christ. As long as the church is viewed, from both inside and without, as a place where one can belong only after one has “gotten one’s life together” and acts righteously, it will continue to draw only those who want to appear self-sufficient and who merely seek a cursory blessing from God. However, if a church is known as a place where people readily admit their need for God, their struggles with sin, their reluctance to take up their crosses, and where people are upheld and encouraged by a supportive and understanding community, a culture of receptivity to the life-transforming truths of the Gospel might be achieved.

The foundation of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) can teach the church a lot about perpetuating a culture that fosters the seven SFE. Sam Shoemaker, the spiritual director of AA in its early years, says, “[N]obody gets anywhere till he recognizes a clearly-defined need.... [Likewise, people] are redeemed in a life changing fellowship.” This life-changing fellowship helps persons in need “face themselves as they really are....

They are a society of the ‘before and after,’ with a clear line between the old life and the new.” (Shoemaker)

An intentional effort to set aside the façade so many Christians believe is necessary when it comes to church may be a step in moving toward that type of environment and culture. The church was never intended to be a place where masks have to be worn or pains have to be hidden. Cordeiro, Lewis, and Bird say, “The church is a place for people to be restored into God’s image (Col. 3:10)... The church must embrace people with all their warts and foibles” (27). The message of the body of Christ is not that people need to get their lives together *before* they can be a part of the body; rather, the message of the church is one of hope where people can come *in order to* get their lives together. Wright talks about a person’s tendencies to mask their fears when it comes to the body of Christ:

People suppose that Christian faith is a matter of covering up your fears, of pretending that you haven’t really been a failure, of entering a world of make-believe, like children pulling the bedclothes over their heads, creating a cozy, warm little world from which reality is conveniently excluded. But that is the very opposite of the truth. Easter is about facing fears and discovering hope; Easter is about looking failure in the face and discovering forgiveness and new possibilities. (113)

Philip Yancey summarized it well when he said, “Church is a place where I can say, unashamedly, ‘I don’t need to sin. I need another sinner’” (52). People who are chained to a destructive pattern in their lives can best find their way out of their prison when they take the hand of one who has already found and walked a life-freeing path.

The church of Jesus Christ must be a place where all humanity finds acceptance in the name of Christ. Though some might read Acts 2:47 differently, the section typically translated “enjoying the favor of all the people,” can be literally translated, “having grace

toward all the people [my interpretation].” One could infer from the translation “enjoying the favor,” that those outside the fellowship thought well of the new Christians. Though that inference might be a possibility at the outset of the movement, based on the persecution that was soon to follow, the interpretation could be questioned. However, one could infer from the second translation, “having grace toward,” that regardless of who “the people” were, what their problems were, or how much they may have been challenged by this new and enthusiastic group, those filled with the love and grace of God continued to offer others the same unmerited and undeserved grace that had been offered to them. Based on the second translation, the next line in the text seems to ring truer, “and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

Jerome Ellison speaks about the acceptance level in the church:

The relief of being accepted can never be known by one who never thought himself unaccepted. I hear of “good Christian men and women” belonging to “fine old church families.” There were no good Christians in the first church, only sinners. Peter never let himself or his hearers forget his betrayal in the hour the cock crew. James, stung by the memory of his years of stubborn resistance, warned the church members: “Confess your faults to one another.” That was before there were fine old church families. Today, the last place where one can be candid about one’s faults is in church. In a bar, yes; in a church, no. I know; I’ve tried both places. (210)

Green emphasizes, “[T]he metaphor of healing serves as an invitation to the people of God, not only to be recipients of God’s good gifts of salvation, but also to be agents of healing, to be a community of compassion and restoration” (*Salvation* 53). The body of Christ must move beyond the inference many outside the church have that they must become righteous and worthy before they can enter the church. The absurdity of that sentiment is similar to expecting a person to set one’s own broken leg before entering the

hospital. For a church to be a community of healing, it has to be a place where those who desperately need healing can freely come and acknowledge their specific malady.

Vulnerability is the key. Without it Christians and leaders come across as arrogant and unapproachable. Without a culture that is a safe haven because of vulnerability, the lost, hurting, and sin-filled—which is everyone (Rom. 3:23)—are left to look elsewhere for comfort and hope. Regarding vulnerability, Scazzero states, “In emotionally healthy churches, people live and lead out of brokenness and vulnerability. It is leading out of failure and pain.... It is [a] noticeably different way of life from what is commonly modeled ... in many churches” (110). Sadly, vulnerability in regard to one’s own faith struggles is perceived as spiritual weakness or inadequacy. Because of that misperception, ministers and leaders are less likely to honestly share their own brokenness and pain. Unhappily, as the leadership goes, so follow those who are led.

Allender poses a good question: “How do you embrace honesty? The answer is threefold: give up what is already painfully obvious, tell the truth without telling *all* [original emphasis] the truth, and embrace the gospel in your failure to live the gospel” (173). Gordon MacDonald offers a great word of hope and expectation for a culture of vulnerability and acceptance:

My contention is that revival will spring out of a rediscovery of the power of repentance and the granting of restorative grace. When sanctuaries become places where a man or woman, having failed God and the community of Christ-followers, can open his or her heart and say in blunt language, “I have sinned,” then revival will start. When they can say it without fear that their words will be used against them, repeated in loose-lipped gossip sessions, then revival will commence. (247)

Henri J. M. Nouwen shares encouraging remarks about confession and forgiveness:

Confession and forgiveness are precisely the disciplines by which spiritualization and carnality can be avoided and true incarnation lived.

Through confession, the dark powers are taken out of their carnal isolation, brought into the light, and made visible to the community. Through forgiveness, they are disarmed and dispelled and a new integration between body and spirit is made possible. This might all sound very unrealistic, but anyone who has had any experience with healing communities such as Alcoholics Anonymous has seen the healing power of these disciplines. (68)

Creating this type of environment in a somewhat closed and guarded society is difficult and time consuming. Creating this culture does involve an aspect of teaching and instruction—casting a vision and explaining the steps on how to get there. More than anything, culture is *caught* as much as taught. To make a culture shift in the midst of a guarded environment, those involved must first focus on their own transformation. Once their lives demonstrate vulnerability and honest acceptance of each other's struggles, those standing on the periphery will be drawn to the love and power of that movement.

The Transformation of Heart, Mind, and Life in the Truth

Jesus said, “By their fruits you will know them” (Matt. 7:16). James 2:17 says, “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” Neither Jesus nor James were saying that one needs to act a certain way in order to have an encounter with God. Rather, they were saying if someone truly has an encounter with a Holy Spirit-inspired truth, acquires a genuine desire to experience that truth, surrenders to a willingness to pay the costs, embraces the promises inherent in the truth, and steps out in faith to experience it, God will be able to bring about a transformation in the person's life that will result in a visible manifestation of that truth. McManus writes emphatically about one's inability to remain the same after a genuine encounter with Jesus Christ:

You cannot follow Jesus and remain the same. The journey itself will change you forever—not only your priorities, but your passions. It alters not only your direction, but your desires. It transforms not only your

actions, but your values. It makes you just like Christ and unlike anyone else. It is nothing less than leaving the fake for the real. (*Uprising* 35)

Lloyd-Jones says, “When men and women become Christians, their whole condition is changed, and they are moved from one position to another” (67). McNeal writes about the divine intervention of God. He states that God intervened—in both Testaments—to set the captives free. “In both cases, the deliverance is not just from something but to something” (12). Humanity is delivered from death to life, from lost to found, from hurting to healed, from temporal to eternal, from hopeless to hopeful, all because of the love and new life offered in Jesus Christ.

In Luke’s brief description of the church in Acts 2, he declared some of the tangible results of the mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ. He proclaimed that people were being transformed from lost to found, from hurting to healed, from separated from God to being in relationship with God. He described what Paul would later declare as the outcome of those who would surrender their lives to Jesus Christ: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). Yet one needs to recall Christ’s words to Peter, “on this rock *I* [emphasis mine] will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). Tozer says simply, “The Holy Spirit makes the difference” (141). The Spirit of the living God is the one who does the work of reforming humanity, who does something *in* the surrendered, *upon* the surrendered, and who makes something *of* the surrendered.

This difference of which Tozer spoke is nothing less than a divine metamorphosis of one’s very essence. The transformation to which the Bible refers is not simply a matter of an individual moving from nice to nicer, or from whiskey drinker to teetotaler. Too often the church is content to be good people doing good things for good people. In that

setting, some consider conversion to be nothing more than possibly becoming a conservative Republican. An ongoing transformation through the Holy Spirit should not be confused with moving from nonreligious to religious, or non-churchgoer to churchgoer. The transformation to authentic discipleship is not about mastering a few moral dictates or following a prescribed set of behavioral guidelines. Transformation ultimately is a change in the whole of the individual character (McDonald 242). Persons who attend the plateaued and declining churches often miss this concept because they focus on converting outsiders to insiders because their ultimate understanding of transformation is making them “like us.” Consequently, few of these converts have any real knowledge of the life-transforming power of the Holy Spirit. The only transformation they see is that which they themselves are able to bring about through encouragement, guilt, or corporate pressure. Yet in the original language, according to Laurie, being filled with the Spirit implies something being permeated. The intended mental image is God wants his Holy Spirit to fully permeate the lives of his children in all they say, think, and do (29). Hunter quotes Wesley’s elaboration on the definition of salvation:

By salvation I mean ... a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy and truth. (*To Spread the Power* 40)

Holy Spirit transformation is not about religious practices but the whole of life.

Lloyd John Ogilvie was correct; the metamorphosis is of one’s “very essence,” the core of one’s being. Conversion and its consequent ongoing Holy Spirit-led transformations are radical “to the roots. It is penetrating to the core of our nature. A deeply-rooted [encounter with God] that transforms our character around absolute

allegiance to Christ. Then our goals, values, and desires are completely reoriented” (30).

Willard proclaims, “The most exalted outcome of submersion in the risen Christ is the transformation of the inner self to be like him” (280). McManus summarized well the totality of the transformation of the inner self:

For those who understand the Gospel, we understand that it is a promise of transformation. Transformation is just another word for change. If you don’t like change, you’d better not become a Christian. Once you belong to Jesus, change is inevitable. Our whole Christian experience is an experience of change. It is an experience of putting off the old and putting on the new. It is an experience of no longer being conformed to the pattern of this world but being transformed by the renewing of our minds.

The whole theological concept of sanctification is rooted in the reality that God changes people. Repentance is change, conversion is change, regeneration is change, transformation is change, and sanctification is change. All of the deeply theological constructs that we have embraced and understand to be true cannot exist outside of a theology of change.

The problem is not the insignificance of these areas of change, but that we tend to make them the entire construct for spiritual formation. It’s as if all God is trying to do is stop us from sinning. Yet all of us who have walked with Christ know that there’s more. We know that beyond being greedy is being generous, beyond lying is being truthful, beyond pride is humility, and beyond slander is encouragement. It is not enough to “put off.” We must also “put on.” All of us are encouraged when we begin to see the fruit of the Spirit born in the lives of followers of Christ, reconfirming the work of God in the human heart. (*Unstoppable Force* 81,180)

The work of God in the human life—contrary to popular belief—is not about acceptance, but about making new. A dynamic and growing relationship with God is not intended to be something we add to the Christian journey if we want to excel. A growing relationship with God is the Christian journey. A caterpillar is not transformed by taping wings to it and simply calling it different. The caterpillar is transformed from what it was, a limited entity, confined to the ground, into a butterfly that, though it may still acquiesce to walk the ground, is enabled to soar into the heavens. The transformation of the Holy Spirit is

accomplished when one can say with the risen Christ, “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5).

The Manifestation or Fruit Consequent to Transformation

Jesus said, “By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.... Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:16-18, 20-21). Though Jesus was specifically speaking about how to distinguish true from false prophets, the implication still applies: If someone has truly been transformed in their core by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, there will be some type of manifestation of this change. In John, Jesus speaks of being the true vine and those who follow him as being the branches. He clearly states if someone “remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit” (John 15:5). Jesus did not say he might bear fruit, rather he will bear fruit. Paul explained this idea of a natural outflow of the Spirit when he talked about the fruits, the manifestations, of the Spirit which flow from the ones who live by the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). The message is simple, if one is transformed by the Spirit, there will be evidences in one’s life that testify to that transformation.

In many respects, the material dealing with the early church in Acts 2 describes aspects of the manifestations of lives transformed by the grace of God in Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. Many in the crowd went from curious onlookers or willing participants in Christ’s death, to repentant and baptized followers of the same Christ.

Many moved from an air of self-sufficiency to a yearning for the presence of God, as manifested in their desire to pray. They moved from isolation to connection in fellowship. Some loosened their white-knuckle grip on their possessions and began to share willingly and openly. Whether one reads, “Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles” (Acts 2:43), as a declaration that dramatic healings of bodies or simple healings of relationships occurred—or both, radical transformation took place that proclaimed to the world there was something legitimate about this person called the Christ.

However, one must avoid the trap of automatically equating changed lives and improved moral behavior with the transformation of the Holy Spirit mentioned earlier. People can change their behavior without ever being impacted or transformed by the Spirit. They can be motivated to change their behavior because of monetary gain, risk of reprisal, promise of benefit, or by sheer willpower. Changed behavior does not necessarily imply an inner transformation. However, one cannot be truly transformed without some manifestation of that change in one’s life. Joyce Meyer describes her own experience of the change brought about in her life through the Holy Spirit:

When God baptized me in the Holy Ghost, I felt like He had filled me with liquid love. He did something on the inside of me, and it showed on the outside of me. Internal changes last, and keep showing up in everything we do. That is why you can’t really be a closet Christian. If you are saved, it will show to others. If you say you are saved, but nothing has changed in your life, something is wrong. When Jesus comes to live in you, He will get involved with how you live and how you look at life to make you more like Him. (314)

Therefore, “the genuine presence of the kingdom in a person cannot be hidden” (Willard 279). Nor can the absence of kingdom presence be ignored. If a person has been transformed into a fruit-bearing vine, it will bear fruit (279). Willimon holds that “either

the community is able to point to signs of healing power at work in the world because of what has happened in Christ, or the community is without evidence for its claims” (*Acts* 45). Neighbour says, “Repentance is a new attitude of mind, followed by a new manner of living” (256). Jesus said in John 15:5, “If a man remains in me and I in him, *he will bear* [emphasis mine] much fruit.” Jesus did not say the one who remained in him might bear fruit, or would become interested in studying the possibility of bearing fruit. Jesus said the one who remained in him will bear fruit. The implication is that persons who have been transformed will be different.

The grace of God in Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit is that which makes possible this transformation and consequent renewed manner of living. Tozer says, “If we are going to reproduce Christ on earth and be Christ-like and show forth Christ, we must have the Spirit of Christ” (70). Stedman talks about being an effective Christian:

You can’t be an effective Christian if you aren’t operating in the power of the Holy Spirit. Every attempt ever made to advance the cause of Christianity which does not arise from this source of power only destroys the message God wants to convey. (17)

Part of the message God wants transformed Christians to convey is that humanity’s only hope for an eternally changed life is through an encounter with the living God.

Manifesting the Spirit in Order to Transform the Lives of Others

Sharing the gospel of Christ is a significant manifestation of a life transformed by that same gospel. Jesus spoke to his followers about the manifestation of sharing the gospel,

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matt. 5:14-16)

Robinson and Wall point out the result of Paul's preaching:

In Acts, Paul's preaching leads to the formation of congregations—communities that sustain, express, and embody the new way of life in Christ. These are communities that are all about change, about changed and changing life. Being about the work of changing lives and then changing the world would seem to be the core purpose of the church and of Christian community. (80)

A primary purpose of the Spirit's work is to reveal the glory of God through receptive vessels to a lost and hurting world (Morgan 43). Phillip Henry Lotz points out, "Wesley's conversion lead to inner peace and a passion to influence others to similar transformation." He quotes Wesley as saying, "My life has one point in view, to promote as far as I am able ... to beget, preserve, and increase the life of God in the souls of men" (155). This mind-set drove the overwhelming growth and world-changing outreach of the early Methodists. Wesley communicated to the Methodist societies and the Christians who led them that evangelism could never be a "field specialty or the target of extraordinary years and seasons." Rather, reaching out in both word and deed to a lost world to share the transforming and life changing news of Jesus Christ was to be "the normal" (Hunter, *To Spread the Power* 43).

Manifestation as Evangelism

Along the lines of Wesley's commitment to "promote the life of God in the souls of men," Stedman declares, "All Christians have a role of witness for Jesus, even if they do not have the gift of evangelist" (115). McManus was more to the point when he said, "The idea that you could become a mature Christian and not have a heart that is broken for those who are lost is inconceivable. No measure of Christian maturity exists in our context without an evangelistic lifestyle" (*Unstoppable Force* 223). Stott stated the

presence of an evangelistic lifestyle this way, “The Holy Spirit would not only apply to [the disciples] the salvation which Jesus had achieved by his death and resurrection but would impel them to proclaim throughout the world the good news of this salvation.

Salvation is given to be shared (emphasis mine)” (*Message* 48).

The perception that the good news of Jesus is to be hoarded for one’s own comfort and eternal security is as far away from the heart and intent of God as discovering the cure for cancer and keeping it solely for one’s own family. The story of resurrection—the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of one’s life that was once lost and is now found—is intended to be shared. Keeping this good news to oneself is as strange as building a factory with no shipping department. God is constantly creating a new thing in the believer’s life so that it can be shared with a lost and hurting world.

Mead paints the evangelistic manifestation of the apostolic first-century church:

The community was to “go into the world,” to “be in the world but not of it.” It could not be true to its nature and play it safe. Its marching orders were to engage the world, not withdraw from it.... the church’s people were required to engage with [the world], to witness to their Lord right in the middle of the hostile environment. [The church] also perceived that the meaning of its life was to build up its members with the courage, strength, and skill to communicate God’s good news within that hostile world. Members perceived that the power to engage in that mission—the crossing of the missionary boundary—came from the Holy Spirit. (*Once and Future Church* 12)

St. Ambrose aptly and poetically described the natural inclination of the transformed life to lift high the glory of God to the lost of the world:

There are rivers that flow from the belly of him who drinks from Christ and partakes of the Spirit of God. These rivers therefore when they redound with the grace of the Spirit, lift up their voice. There is also a stream which overflows upon his holy ones like a torrent.... Whoever receives of the fullness of this stream, like John the Evangelist, like Peter and Paul, lifts up his voice. Just as the apostles with the harmony of their message spread the sound of their preaching of the gospel to all the ends

of the earth, so also does he begin to tell the good tidings of the Lord Jesus. (917)

“The witnesses of Jesus Christ are able to carry out their task throughout the earth only through the empowerment of the Spirit of God” (Larkin and Williams 241). As with every aspect and step of the Christian journey, the movement and empowerment of the Holy Spirit cannot be understated. St. Ambrose said the rivers that flow from the person who has surrendered his life to Christ flow because they partake of the Spirit of God. Without the Spirit flowing *into* the believer, there will be no Spirit flowing *through* the believer.

Manifestation as Distinguished from the World

The manifestation that gives glory to God is not only about words spoken, but also about changed lives that speak of a visible core transformation. Inevitably, transformation draws the attention of the world; if for no other reason than the world’s attention is drawn out of curiosity for what it sees as different or distinctive. Regarding the gospel witness of noticeably changed lives Tozer says, “[W]e should always be able to distinguish the children of God from the children of the World” (16). Newbigin describes the Christian life that has lost its saltiness:

[If the Christian life is] *not* [original emphasis] different from the life around it, it is salt which has lost its saltiness. We ought to recognize, perhaps more sharply than we often do, that there *must* [original emphasis] be a profound difference between a community which adores God as the great reality, and one where it is assumed God can be ignored. (146)

The sad irony of many of the plateaued and declining churches today is that often in the midst of their bemoaning their decline, they consistently desire to blend in, remain indistinct, and avoid standing out as unique in the world around them. Their motivation for this bizarre mindset is often to maintain their seclusion by not drawing attention to

themselves. However, the normal disciple's life should look abnormal to an unbelieving world (Laurie 124). Laurie points out that "everywhere the disciples preached the gospel of Christ, they upset the norm" (14). He goes on to say, "[T]he greatest compliment the church today could receive would be to have people complain that we Christians are turning the world on its ear" (15) regarding a life of genuine promise. The Spirit-enabled transformed life of the believer is not to manifest Spirit-empowered transformation as a means of condemnation, or an avenue for one's own glorification. Rather, the transformed believer is to live out the manifestations of the Spirit so as to glorify God and consequently draw lost world to him (Matt. 5:16). The goal is to point a floundering world to the hope of the One who can make a difference and show the way that is full of promise.

Ongoing Cyclical Process

The experience of these spiritual formation emphases is a constantly repeating process and cycle in the life and ministry of the church and its people. One does not simply pass through the various levels of these SFE never again to repeat the experience of an encounter with God regarding a specific truth. These SFE must be understood as a process in which one has a non-linear, often helical experience of truth, desire, cost, promise, and step. That cyclical encounter hopefully leads to some level of transformation that manifests itself to the world. Maturing Christians will eventually have another encounter with God that leads to deeper transformation, and this process continues as persons move deeper and deeper in their relationships with God. The process may have been what Paul had in mind when he said, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on" (Phil. 3:12). Stott says, "The

church is both already holy and not yet holy. It has been sanctified, and it is called to sanctity. Moreover, this is so of *all those everywhere who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ* [original emphasis]” (*Basic Leadership* 23). Robinson and Wall suggest this process is an ongoing process when they say, “God is a living God.... God is still speaking and...God is doing a new thing” (159). Just as each individual is in the process of pressing on (Phil. 3:12), so too is the church.

Summary

Many people believe in the importance of new church starts, yet 80 percent of church plants do not exist after one year. Many that continue after one year will never grow past an attendance between one hundred and one hundred twenty. Many church plant experts espouse numerous dynamic structures, methods, and ministries for church planting, suggesting that if followed, may lead to growing church plants. Despite the availability of these suggestions, church plants still often fail. Those interesting in growing the kingdom of God need to consider something other than dynamic structures and methods as important elements in possibly stemming the tide of failing church plants. A possible element may be ongoing spiritual formation emphases that seek to keep the structures of the church plant centered on God, in line with the heart of God, and, consequently, guided and directed by the Holy Spirit. The proposal of this project was that a—not the—biblically supported pattern for spiritual development would consist of an intentional, honest, and progressive emphasis and experience of the following: (1) The *truths* of the gospel of Jesus Christ, (2) the *desire* to experience the truths of Christ in one’s life, (3) the *sacrifice/cost* implicit in experiencing the truth, (4) the *promise* inherent in every truth of the gospel, (5) the *step* necessary to make oneself receptive to

the truth, (6) the *transformation* of heart, mind, and life implicit in the truth, and (7) the *manifestation* or *fruit* consequent to transformation.

The following chapter develops a methodology that guides the intentional focus of a church plant on these SFE. Chapter 3 also presents the method and instruments used to measure the effectiveness of the SFE on the spiritual growth and development of participants in a new church, as well as the concurrent patterns of the spiritual growth of the church plant.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to conduct a case study of The River United Methodist Church, a church plant in Richmond, Texas. This involved the evaluation of participants' self-reports of spiritual formation at the conclusion of a study on seven spiritual formation emphases, as well as the concurrent patterns of the spiritual growth of the church plant. I was appointed to the specific church plant utilized in this study. In this study, I focused on the possible impact of an intentional focus on seven SFE on the perceived spiritual development and growth of persons who met at least two of the following criteria: (1) attended leadership and launch meetings, (2) took part in at least one, eight-week small group study utilizing research-developed curriculum focusing on the seven SFE, or independently read the eight-week, small-group curriculum, and (3) attended weekly worship for a twelve-month period after launch. The study also sought to discern any potential perceived impact among the above qualified participants' spiritual growth, as well as the development of the church plant of which they were a part. The anticipated outcome was that a perceived positive growth in individual spiritual formation would have a corresponding perceived positive impact on the growth and development of the church plant. The hypothesized progression was as follows: if the core values, structures, and ministries were formed and informed by an ongoing encounter with the Holy Spirit—via an intentional focus on the seven SFE—then the resulting church plant would exhibit signs congruent with growth and development. Using predominantly qualitative data analysis, I analyzed data from four instruments in

order to ascertain participant's perception of the impact of an intentional focus on the SFE on participants' spiritual growth, and consequent church growth and development.

Research Questions

Three primary research questions guided the scope of the study to observe and evaluate the participants' self-report of spiritual formation at the conclusion of a study on seven spiritual formation emphases, as well as the concurrent patterns of the spiritual growth of the new church plant

Research Question 1

In what ways did the participants' self-reports of their spiritual formation at the completion of the study reflect the spiritual formation emphases presented in the eight week study?

This research question attempted to identify the perceived effect resulting from an intentional focus on seven SFE. The seven SFE were

1. The *truths* of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,
2. The *desire* to experience the truths of Christ in one's life,
3. The *sacrifice/cost* implicit in experiencing the truth,
4. The *promise* inherent in every truth of the gospel,
5. The *step* necessary to make oneself receptive to the truth,
6. The *transformation* of heart, mind, and life implicit in the truth, and
7. The *manifestation* or *fruit* consequent to transformation.

Some of the questions raised regarding the impact of the various SFE were (but not limited to), What truths had the greatest impact on participants? How influential were those new truths in one's faith walk? Did participants grasp the concept and importance

of one's level of desire in experiencing genuine spiritual growth? Did their desire for a relationship with God increase over the course of the study? What were some of the costs that deterred increased growth or surrender? Did participants grasp the magnitude of God's promises? Did they take step seriously in the spiritual formation process, or did the focus on the SFE remain only a mental exercise? Was the difference between transformation and fruit understood, and did people actually perceive any transformation and consequent fruit in their own lives?

To track any perceived positive or negative impact, I employed three data-collecting instruments. The first was a researcher-designed questionnaire other small group leaders and I administered upon completion of an eight-week study using research-developed curriculum focusing on the seven SFE (see Appendix A). Persons who experienced the SFE curriculum in a small group setting, as well as those who read the curriculum independently, received the questionnaire. Twenty volunteers provided the second data-collecting instrument. The twenty volunteers completed a one-to-two page reflection statement articulating their perception of the impact of the seven SFE on each participant's personal spiritual growth, as well as the health and growth of the church plant, (see Appendix E). The third instrument was my journal entries as a participant-observer over the course of the intervention.

Research Question 2

What evidence of spiritual health and growth was observed in the church plant across the time frame in which participants were engaged in the spiritual formation emphasis, culminating in the one year anniversary of the first public worship?

This research question sought to conjecture the possible impact an intentional spiritual formation focus might have had on the growth of a new church. Though this study was not designed to statistically prove any correlation of data between the positive development in spiritual formation among participants in a new church and the growth of the new church, it did seek to pose continually the question, “Does a spiritual formation emphasis have any perceived impact on the growth of a church plant?”

The measuring instruments utilized for question 1 also applied to research question 2. Each instrument contained an aspect that focused on the impact of the individual growth regarding the SFE on the participants’ involvement in the life and ministry of the church. This study assumed that as persons continued to experience Spirit-empowered transformation in their lives, their involvement and impact in the ministry of the church would increase. As that process was multiplied across the leadership and membership of the church, one might be able to perceive an overall growth and development in the church. Along with the measuring instruments used in question 1, I used the ministry records and church statistics collected by the church statistician and submitted to the sponsoring church, Grace Fellowship, at the conclusion of the intervention period. The data compilation team collected quantitative measurements such as professions of faith, baptisms, worship attendance, number of individuals in small groups, number of small groups, and number of individuals involved in mission activity.

Research Question 3

What were some of the contextual, situational, and perceptual factors that may have had a perceived impact on the effect of the spiritual formation emphases on the persons taking part in this study?

Due to the various influences of daily life on individuals taking part in this case study, this project was not able to account for every intervening influence that may have had an impact on the understanding or experience of the SFE. Hence, an aspect of the questionnaire sought to discover some of the possible intervening elements and their perceived impact or influence. The articulation and quantifying of these possible impacts were primarily based on the responses and comparative analysis of the questionnaire results. I utilized the researcher-developed questionnaire and my journal entries over the course of the intervention as the primary measuring instruments employed for research question 3.

Population and Participants

The population for this study was residents of a specific, geographically defined area in the Richmond, Texas, area of Fort Bend County. The majority of the participant group possessed a high school diploma or college degree, and was from a middle- to upper-middle-class culture. All of those who took part in the study attended the new church plant, The River. The study focused on sixty persons who were a part of the new church plant, and who took part in an eight-week, researcher-developed curriculum, either in a small-group setting or through independent reading of the material. The participant group was also active for at least twelve months after the launch of the church plant's weekly worship services.

The specific breakdown of participants who returned questionnaires was as follows:

- The first group of twelve launch team members who, in October, took part in the original inception of the SFE curriculum,

- Four small groups that met in the spring of the first year of the church plant and were led by four couples from the original October small group,
- Two small groups that met in the summer of the first year of the church plant and were led by leaders who took part in the spring small groups,
- Persons who read the SFE curriculum but who did not take part in a group.

Instrumentation

This study was a fourteen-month case study of a new church plant in the Richmond, Texas, area. I used a researcher-designed questionnaire to measure the perception of possible growth each individual experienced as a result of an intentional focus on seven SFE (see Appendix A). Other small group leaders and I gave the questionnaire following the completion of an eight-week, researcher-developed small group curriculum study. I also gave the questionnaire to persons upon their independent reading of the SFE material. The questionnaire consisted of twenty-two questions based predominantly on a five-point Likert scale. Various open-ended questions were included in order to provide data relevant to a participant's own perception of spiritual growth and development. The more subjective questions also provided an opportunity for elaboration and detail of the impact of each SFE. The questionnaire included statements that provided demographic information and data relevant to the participant's life-condition at the time of the study.

In conjunction with the questionnaire, I asked twenty persons to write a one-to two-page reflection statement describing their perception of the effect of the focus on the SFE on their own spiritual growth as well as that of the church plant. The twenty met at least two of the following criteria: (1) attended leadership and launch meetings, (2) took

part in an eight-week, small-group study utilizing research-developed curriculum focusing on the SFE, or independently read the eight-week small group curriculum, and (3) attended weekly worship for a ten-month period after launch.

Along with the qualitative reflection statements, I utilized my journal entries made throughout the design, actual intervention, study, and review process of the project as another data source. This data offered a picture of the continuous progression of the intervention from its inception to conclusion.

In order to offer a conjectured, albeit statistically uncorroborated connection between the spiritual growth and development of the small group participants and the overall growth of the church plant, the final data source was the quantifiable data collected twelve months after the initial launch date. This data included, but was not limited to, average weekly attendance, growth in small groups, the number of professions of faith, and baptisms.

All four instruments were based on a fourteen-month time period, two months before until twelve months after the new church launch date.

Process and Design of Researcher-Designed Questionnaire

I solidified the design of the questionnaire after testing it with a volunteer test group. This group consisted of persons who were not to be a part of the future church plant, but who, at some previous time, had been under my ministry. I chose to acquire a test group from this specific population based on the assumption this group would be willing to take the time to review and answer the questionnaire, as well as honestly share insights and suggestions. Thirty-four of sixty persons were ultimately part of the test group.

Once the test questionnaires were returned, I made the suggested adjustments. The research review team received the second draft of the questionnaire for their input and suggestions. The team made changes to the questionnaire resulting in twenty-two Likert-scale questions, ten fill-in-the-blank questions, and two multiple-choice questions, all dealing with the SFE. The team included seventeen other questions in order to provide demographic, experiential, and life condition data.

I had two motivations for the questionnaire's varied style. First of all, the test was varied in order to broaden the scope of the questionnaire. I anticipated that a test consisting of only Likert-scale questions would be confining, and one comprised solely of open-ended questions could possibly be overwhelming to analyze. The second and primary motivation for including the open-ended questions was to provide participant-specific responses to their perceived spiritual growth and formation. Though the Likert-scale questions could be more easily coded and measured, the participants never completed a pretest. The absence of a pretest made it impossible to substantiate the statistical validity of the Likert-scale questions. However, the open-ended questions provided not only ample information regarding the insights participants gleaned from the SFE encounter and the perception of their individual spiritual growth, but also broader spectrum issues I neither foresaw, nor were suggested by the test group.

In order to ensure the anonymity of eventual participants, I numbered each questionnaire and asked that the questionnaires be returned in groups. I took these steps in order to ensure a higher percentage of persons answering the questionnaire honestly as well as completing the demographic information. The research team desired to obtain the

demographic information in order to evaluate the perceived impact of gender, age, background, or life condition. on one's encounter with the SFE.

Due to the fact that I did not run Chronbach's Alpha to determine if the scale of the questionnaire was statistically reliable, hence acquiring the measure of stability, I am unable to address the questionnaire's reliability.

Reflection Statements

Eleven months after the launch of weekly worship services, I asked twenty participants in the church plant to write a one-to-two page reflection on their perception of the impact of the focus on the SFE on their own spiritual growth as well as that of the growth and development of church plant. The twenty participants met at least two of the following criteria: (1) attended leadership and launch meetings, (2) took part in at least one eight-week, small-group study utilizing research-developed curriculum focusing on the seven SFE, or independently read the eight-week small group curriculum, and (3) attended weekly worship for a ten-month period after launch. I called and emailed each person whom I was asking to complete a reflection statement. Each receptive participant received a letter of instruction (see Appendix E). In order to foster more honest disclosure, I encouraged each participant to type their answers on the sheet and return them to me anonymously. They were able to return it anonymously by placing it in a legal-size envelope with my name on it, bringing it to a Sunday morning worship service, and leaving it on the table where the staff leaves their belongings during the service. All twenty were returned.

Journal Entries

Throughout the course of the development, implementation, and study of the intervention, I kept an ongoing journal of thoughts, perceptions, insights, struggles, and observations regarding the small group material, the progress of the small groups, and any perceived effect the focus on the SFE might be having on the new church. At the conclusion of the study, I analyzed these notes in order to provide participant-observer insights into the progression and impact of the intervention.

Quantitative Records

I acquired the following statistical measurements from a church statistician or a representative statistician from each small group:

- Professions of faith,
- Baptisms,
- Weekly worship attendance at primary worship service(s),
- Number of individuals regularly attending small groups (*regularly* being established as two times per month),
- Number of small group leaders,
- Number of small groups,
- Number of persons involved in monthly mission activity,
- Financial giving (to all areas of ministry including general budget and missional outreach),
- Number of volunteers for weekly church activities (worship, youth, children's ministry, etc.), and
- Number of persons trained and involved in active ministry in and through

the life of the church.

Eight-Week SFE Curriculum

I made a devotional booklet available that offered eight weeks of focus on the seven SFE (see Appendix B). Each week, participants studied a different portion of the Sermon on the Mount. I distinguished the seven days in each week's reading to correspond with one of the seven SFE. Though this method of distinction was not always the case, most weeks the sequence of the seven SFE was as follows:

- Day one focused on a specific *truth* of the gospel
- Day two emphasized the *cost or surrender* involved in embracing and experiencing that particular truth
- Day three focused on the level of *desire* for an encounter with God in light of that truth of the gospel
- Day four reminded the reader of the *promise* inherent in that truth
- Day five offered suggested *steps* the reader could take to make himself or herself open to an encounter and a transformation in light of the week's truth
- Day six concentrated on the possible *transformation* resulting from an encounter with this aspect of the gospel of Christ
- The seventh day presented possible *manifestations* of a transforming encounter with God

Over a six-month period, approximately eighty people participated in a small group study of this curriculum. Approximately another forty independently read the book.

A detailed timeline of the church plant and SFE curriculum

implementation was as follows:

- June 2007 Appointed as associate to Grace Fellowship
- August 2007 First gathering of interested participants from Grace
- First small group meeting based on SFE curriculum
- January 2008 Launch of public services
- Spring 2008 Start of four small groups based on SFE curriculum and led

by fall 2007 small group participants

- Distribution of SFE curriculum for independent reading
- May 2008 First request to independent readers for persons willing to

complete questionnaire

- Summer 2008 Start of two small groups based on SFE curriculum and led

by Spring small group participants

- Sept. 2008 Second request to independent readers for persons willing

to complete questionnaire

- Dec 2008 Request to 20 leaders and church representatives regarding

reflective statements

Variables

The variables for this study were the perception of individual spiritual growth and any possible effect on the growth and development of the new church.

A number of possible intervening variables were present that could have had a perceived impact on the degree and development of individual spiritual growth development. These variables include, but are not limited to, (1) the ability of the leadership—clergy and laity—to adequately communicate and stay focused on the SFE,

(2) the demographics of the area, (3) the methodology of this church plant case study (mother-daughter), (4) the conduciveness of the specific church culture intended to facilitate honest disclosure and dialogue regarding the SFE, (5) the level of other spiritual formation emphases each participant may have experienced outside the ministry of the church plant, and (6) life circumstances that may have impacted spiritual growth and health. Regarding the last two intervening variables, participants had an opportunity, via specific questions in the questionnaire, to articulate these variables and their possible level of influence.

Data Collection

The first small group organized for the new church plant started meeting in late October 2007. Ten persons took part in the first meeting. During the first meeting, I introduced the group to the dissertation topic and the focus on the seven SFE. I proposed a weekly study based on curriculum I would write utilizing Matthew 5-7 and focusing on the SFE (see p. 104).

The group met weekly for eight weeks and discussed the curriculum. During the final night of the eight-week study, each of the twelve participants was given the researcher-designed questionnaire. I instructed them not to put their names on the questionnaire, and to answer as honestly, and as clearly as possible. The group was aware that the questionnaire dealt with my dissertation project, and they were informed that references to both growth and nongrowth would be beneficial to the overall study. The participants completed their questionnaires and returned them that night.

The group continued to meet weekly as I continued to write sixteen more weeks of weekly material based on Matthew 5-7 and employing the SFE. On the twelfth week, I

asked the group if, in March, they would be willing to divide into four separate small groups and lead eight week studies based on the original eight weeks they had completed four weeks before. Four of the couples agreed to lead small groups, employ the curriculum, and administer the questionnaires during the final session.

In March 2008, the original eight-week curriculum was printed in book form and entitled, *A Walk on the Mountain* (see Appendix B). In an attempt to avoid any pressure to take the eight-week study, I invited the entire church to take part in the study, and only the leaders knew the study was connected to my dissertation project. In order to facilitate the study being perceived as simply “another small group opportunity being offered by the church,” as one research team member stated, we suggested a five dollar donation for those who wanted the book. I clearly communicated that those who could not afford the five dollars were more than welcome to take a book. I established a simple basket on the church’s information table as the donation location. We never asked anyone whether or not they had made a donation for the book. The donations went directly toward the printing cost of the book and neither I nor the church received any profits.

We made the book available after each Sunday morning worship service. We encouraged new and regular attendees to sign up for one of the four small groups studying the book. A total of fifty persons signed up for the four small groups. In early May, at the conclusion of the eight-week study, each group leader administered the questionnaire. After repeated reminders, I finally received twenty-eight completed questionnaires. The only follow-up protocol was one phone call to each group leader to remind them to collect the questionnaires if participants had taken them home.

During the same time period, persons who read the book but were not able to take part in a small group study returned nine other questionnaires. I approached this group primarily to provide at least a sampling of data regarding the influence of experiencing the SFE without the benefit of a small group dynamic. In August, one other group of eight completed the eight-week study, answered, and returned the questionnaires. Participants returned a total of forty-five completed questionnaires.

In December 2008, eleven months after launch date of the church plant's weekly worship services, I asked twenty church plant members to complete the reflections statements. I gave each participant a letter of instruction (see Appendix E) and encouraged them to type the statement but not put their name on the document. I also gave each participant an envelope and asked them to return it personally to me by 4 January 2009.

A church plant statistician kept the church's quantitative statistical records on a weekly basis. The statistician submitted the records to me and the leadership of our sponsoring church in January 2009. The records covered a fourteen-month period, two months prior to, until twelve months after the launch of weekly worship.

Data Analysis

After I made two attempts to acquire as many completed questionnaires as possible, I began the analysis of the forty-five that were submitted. I gave the nominal (Likert-scale) data in each question a numeric value based on a positive or negative response regarding each SFE. I used Microsoft Excel as the sole data collection and analysis tool. I labeled the questionnaires numerically in order to be able to return to the

actual questionnaire for clarification regarding data. I entered all fifty questions, including the verbatim responses for all open-ended questions.

The first Excel sheet consisted of a detailed analysis of mean answers for every question, a tallying of the various non-nominal demographics, and percentages of varying answers to specific key questions. I created a new baseline Excel sheet by removing all of the written answers (yet retaining references to whether an answer was given and how many answers were provided in the open-ended questions) and creating a column for overall scores. Calculating the overall scores provided a possible and simpler means of comparing the different groupings based on demographics, life conditions, and perceptions. This process offered some insight into research question 3. However, due to the absence of a pretest, the Likert scores were not statistically reliable but played a supportive role to the more substantial participant responses to the open-ended questions.

Using the base-line overall score spreadsheet, I created fifteen different spreadsheets. I divided the fifteen new sheets topically into everything from gender to which SFE aspect was the hardest to understand. A complete list of all Excel comparison sheets can be found in Appendix G. The spreadsheets for each individual grouping primarily focused on calculating the mean score and percentage for each qualifying aspect of that question or demographic. For example, when calculating the possible effect one's life condition had on one's perceived spiritual formation growth, I calculated the mean of the overall scores for those whose life condition was "Very Enjoyable," "Enjoyable," "Neutral," "Stressful," and "Very stressful." I also calculated the percentage of how many circled which life condition.

The most significant amount of time was spent analyzing and coding the various open-ended questions throughout the questionnaire. A list of the resulting spreadsheets can also be found in Appendix G. I separated into columns representing each participant's first, second, and third responses each of the open-ended questions that contained three possible responses. I created two distinctive spreadsheets for each open-ended question. One spreadsheet contained the actual, verbatim responses to each question. The other spreadsheet consisted of an abbreviated coding of each of the responses. For example, when asked to respond to "The following are the top three steps I have committed to in order to continue growing in my relationship with God," a participant might have written, "To take the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world." The abbreviated version of that was simply, "Witnessing." In order to acquire a more objective and comparative understanding of each participant's open-ended responses, I asked a member of the research team to help with this aspect of the analysis and abbreviation process.

I read and reread the material, allowing ample time for the responses to formulate in my mind. I returned to both the verbatim answers and the abbreviated answers in order to code each based on primary categories, themes, and threads. At this stage, I began to notice a pattern of responses that had to do primarily with self, others, and God. Once I completed the coding, I made calculations to ascertain percentages of responses given regarding specific categories, as well as the percentage of participants offering at least one response under a specific category.

Analysis for Research Question 1

In order to organize my response to research question 1, I established a seven-part outline that paralleled the seven SFE. I identified the Likert-type questions for each of the SFE. For each separate participant, I added together that person's scores on all Likert questions for each SFE. I then divided the sum by the number of Likert-type questions for each SFE, thus acquiring each participant's mean score regarding each SFE. After calculating each participants' mean scores, I added all the participants' means together and divided by the number of participants (forty-five) and was able to acquire the mean score for the entire group for each SFE. Those scores are referenced in Chapter 4.

After calculating the mean score for the various SFE, I read each participants' responses to the open ended questions that correspond to each of the SFE. After analyzing the responses, I grouped similar responses together based on a common thread, emphasis, focus, or idea. I titled and examined these groupings, meeting the need for the inherent qualitative coding of a case study. The elaboration of this analysis is found in Chapter 4.

A similar examination and coding of the reflection statements and my journal entries provided further qualitative and explanatory data to the insights and threads I uncovered via the questionnaires. Findings from the combined analysis of these three data sources are offered in Chapter 4.

Analysis for Research Question 2

I obtained the data relevant to answering research question 2 primarily from the reflection statements, my observations as the participant-observer, and the key open-ended questions in the questionnaire that did not have to do specifically with a SFE. As I

accessed the data and insights, the attempt was not to establish a time-line or sequence but to provide a description of perceived “evidences” and implications of the effect of the SFE on the individuals and the church as a whole. In Chapter 4, I articulate these perceptions.

Analysis for Research Question 3

To respond to the question of potential intervening variables, I drew on three sources: (1) my personal observations as the participant-observer, (2) the specifically referenced variables noted by participants in the open-ended questions (specifically those under hunger), and (3) the questionnaire’s statistical demographic data that articulated issues like life condition and small group participation. Taking into account that the researcher-designed questionnaire was not statistically validated, I used extreme caution in conjecturing any direct correlation between participants’ demographic, life-condition, or perception information and the overall impact of the SFE on their spiritual growth. Any suggested connections were those supported by the qualitative responses in the various open-ended questions.

In order to help facilitate comparisons between groupings, I calculated an overall development score for each participant. I used various criteria in the calculation of the overall score. For every Likert scale question in the first thirty questions, I allotted a five to the most positive response for each question and a one to the most negative. If no answer was provided, I allotted the question a zero. For questions that offered a negative response to a *lack* of growth due to the SFE, I allotted a five to the most negative answer. Questions that offered three fill-in-the-blanks were scored based on the number of blanks containing an answer, i.e., one point for one blank, etc. I gave either a five or a zero to

simple fill-in-the-blank questions with only one possible answer. I gave a five when any answer was provided and a zero when the participants offered no response. The reasoning behind this latter scoring was that an aspect of the SFE was taking a concrete step toward experiencing transformation in light of any given truth. My assumption was that if the participant was either unwilling or unable to formulate any response to a fill-in-the-blank, then the participant did not intentionally engage in the step aspect of the SFE, at least in regard to that particular open-ended question.

Generalizability

This study focused on sixty persons who took part in an eight-week, researcher-developed curriculum via either a small group or independent reading. The participant group was from a specific area of the country, educated, from a middle to upper-middle class culture, and attended a specific church plant. Therefore, the project is limited in its scope, and the findings generalizable to persons from a similar setting and background.

Another restrictive factor of the study's generalizability was the limited exposure of the participants to a focused emphasis on the seven SFE. The abrupt change in the launch date of the church plant—due to worship space availability, and the consequent push to quickly build a sustainable structure for the new church—severely reduced the amount of time available for training and equipping core leadership in the communication process of the seven SFE. The reduced training period may have had an adverse effect on the actual encounter and perception of the eight-week small group curriculum in the groups that I did not lead.

A final restrictive factor in regard to generalizability would be the list of seven SFE. I arrived at the seven SFE via biblical and literature research, past ministerial

experience, and personal introspection. Given different training, education, and experiences, other SFE could be suggested and might be equally valid.

This research adds to existing studies related to spiritual formation and church growth, and adds the component of specific spiritual formation emphases and the postulated positive effects on one's spiritual formation, as well as potential positive development of a church plant. The findings can have direct implications for pastors who choose to make spiritual formation a significant part of the foundation for their churches by providing at least one other viable option in spiritual formation. The research methodology and findings may also have transference application to other denominations similar to the setting of the United Methodist Church in this study.

Ethics

Ethical issues were considered regarding data collection, analysis, security, as well as the small group SFE curriculum distribution.

Regarding Data Collection, Analysis, and Security

In order to ensure anonymity, all small group questionnaires were returned as a group with no name attached. I placed the questionnaires in a folder until I collected the very last set of questionnaires. Eight months passed between the collection of the first questionnaires and the eventual analysis of the data.

The other small group leaders and I informed group participants of the previous procedures prior to completing the questionnaire. We also made participants aware that I and one other person would be the only persons analyzing the data, yet I qualified that since the questionnaires were completed anonymously, the person helping me with data

entry would never be aware of the participant's answers. I also informed the participants that upon graduation, I would destroy all questionnaires.

As was noted regarding the description of the reflection statements, I encouraged each participant to type their answers on a blank sheet, place them in an unmarked envelope, and on Sunday mornings, leave them for me anonymously.

Small Group SFE Curriculum.

Though the practice of Asbury Theological Seminary Doctor of Ministry students is not to charge for any material used in a Doctor of Ministry dissertation project, the research team suggested a "donation" for those who were interested in taking part in the small group study. The reasoning behind the donation was as follows:

1. Experience and sampling led the research team to believe people would be more invested in the study and the curriculum if it were not free.
2. The five dollar suggested amount was only suggested. Neither I nor any other small group leader ever made an intentional attempt to collect funds. The persons who could not afford the donation were encouraged to take a book.
3. Neither the other small group leaders nor I kept any record of who did or did not make a donation.
4. The research team felt not disclosing to the church that the SFE focus was my dissertation project would be advantageous to the overall integrity of the study. Asking for a donation would perpetuate the atmosphere of a typical small group study.
5. The donations went solely to pay for the printing cost of the curriculum.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Church planting is never an easy endeavor. At best, the success rate of church plants is dismal. Many church plant researchers suggest various structural models as possible answers toward stemming the tide of unsuccessful church planting. The purpose of this study was to conduct a case study of The River United Methodist Church, a church plant in Richmond, Texas, which observed and evaluated participants' self-reports of spiritual formation at the conclusion of a study on seven spiritual formation emphases, as well as the concurrent patterns of the spiritual growth of the church plant.

This study was designed to answer the following research questions: In what ways did the participants' self-reports of their spiritual formation at the completion of the study reflect the spiritual formation emphases presented in the eight week study? What evidence of spiritual health and growth was observed in the church plant across the time frame in which participants were engaged in the spiritual formation emphasis, culminating in the one year anniversary of the first public worship? What were some of the contextual, situational, and perceptual factors that may have had a perceived impact on the effect of the spiritual formation emphases on the persons taking part in this study?

Profile of Subjects

In the fall of 2007, twelve members of a church launch team took part in a weekly Bible study employing curriculum I wrote based on Matthew 5-7 that utilized the SFE. Though the biblical foundation of this study was Acts 2, I chose to employ Jesus' Sermon on the Mount because it contained numerous core truths to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the spring of 2008, following the January 2008 launch of the new church, four couples

from the original twelve small group participants led four new small groups using a published version of the first eight weeks of the original twenty-four week study. Upon completion of the eight-week study, the other small group leaders and I administered the questionnaires to all forty group participants.

In order to acquire questionnaire responses that would inform the overall study, I also gave the questionnaire to the following groups: (1) two small groups that met after the initial spring series of small group meetings, and (2) persons who read the published eight-week SFE curriculum, but were not a part of a small group. I gave the survey to persons who were not a part of a small group in order to possibly ascertain the impact of the SFE on persons who did not experience the SFE in a small group setting.

Of sixty surveys distributed, forty-five were returned in time to do the statistical analysis. Table 4.1 notes the demographic and percentage break-down of the forty-five returned surveys: Thirty-four participants (75 percent) took part in a small group study of the SFE material. Approximately 69 percent had been Christian eleven years or more. Thirty-nine participants (87 percent) attended weekly worship services at the new church. Less than 7 percent did not hold a college degree or higher. Approximately 84 percent frequently read or listened to other Christian material during the time they were taking part in the SFE study. Nineteen of the participants were male and twenty-six were female. Twenty-nine participants (65 percent) described their life circumstances as enjoyable. Just over 60 percent of participants described their job circumstances as enjoyable. Thirty-nine participants considered themselves Methodists.

Table 4.1. Demographics of Forty-Five Participant Questionnaires

Demographic	%
Attended a Small group	75.5
Christian 11 Years or More	69
Attended Church Weekly	87
Education Level College or Above	93
Encountered Other Christian Material	84
Male	43
Female	57
Life Condition was Enjoyable During Study	65
Job Situation was Enjoyable During Study	60
Considered Self to be a Methodist	87

Research Question 1

The first Research question was, “In what ways did the participants’ self-reports of their spiritual formation at the completion of the study reflect the spiritual formation emphases presented in the eight week study?” To provide insights into this question, I utilized three of the four primary data sources: researcher-designed questionnaire (see Appendix A), the end-of-study reflective statements, and my own journal entries. The first two data sources were more significant in that they reflected directly the self-reports of the participants. I referenced my journal entries as supportive material that offered my own perception of threads of processes, as well as participants’ remarks I noted over the course of the study.

Findings Regarding Truth

Table 4.2 shows the mean score of participants’ Likert scale questions regarding truth was 4.24 on a scale ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high). In Chapter 1, I defined *Truth* as any biblical truth related to being in a living relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In the questionnaire, a score of 4 was given to the Likert scale word “Agree”, i.e. “Over the course of this study, I have encountered a number of life challenging truths”

(Question 1). Hence, the self-report of the truth score of 4.24 indicated that at the end of the study, the majority of the participants agreed that new truths of the gospel were becoming real to them.

Table 4.2. Participants' Post-Study Responses to the SFE

SFE	Likert Mean	Rank by Mean	% Difficulty Understanding	Rank	% Difficulty Experiencing	Rank
Truth	4.2444	1	4		7	
Cost	3.4519	6	16	3	18	2
Hunger	3.5926	4	22	1	11	5
Promise	4.2111	2	4		7	
Step	3.4444	7	13	4	16	4
Transformation	4.1444	3	11	5	20	1
Fruit	3.5444	5	18	2	18	2

One of the challenges of an intentional focus on the SFE is that the Spirit speaks to persons about a wide variety of truths in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Despite the broad range of truths inherent in the Beatitudes, participants tended to note truths that were specifically articulated in the text of the Beatitudes. A notation from a journal entry early in the process of refining the SFE study process shed some light on the somewhat narrow range of truths referenced in the questionnaire regarding participants' spiritual formation, "Though truth is not a hard concept to grasp, apparently it's difficult for people to accept permission to grapple with a specific truth the Spirit is laying on their hearts. It seems that if it's written in a book, it's only permissible to talk about the specifically stated truth." Though the other leaders and I encouraged participants to struggle with whatever truths the Spirit brought to mind over the course of the study, many tended to focus predominantly on the truths stated in the printed text. Consequently, because the eight-week study was based on Matthew 5:3-14, many of the truths noted in the open-ended

questions directly referenced the Beatitudes. Of the seven SFE, the answers provided for Truth were more likely to be one- or two-word responses or a reference to a specific verse in Matthew. Specifically, the three primary truths referenced were “Peacemakers,” “Poor in spirit,” and “Mercy.”

Approximately 29 percent of the 119 truth responses offered referenced peacemakers as a truth that had impacted their lives (see Table 4.3). Most participants noted simply “Peacemaker,” or referenced the verse in Matthew. Others elaborated slightly on the truths related to “Blessed are the peacemakers” by writing statements such as, “I have to put myself in situations to be a peacemaker.”

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God” (Matt. 5:3) was also referenced 29 percent of the time out of the 119 truths. Like peacemaker, most participants simply noted “poor in spirit” or the verse reference in Matthew. Others were more descriptive about the depth of the poverty of their spirit with remarks like, “My desperate need for Christ,” and “I need a relationship with God through Jesus.”

Twelve participants (27 percent) referenced the third most often articulated truth, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy” (Matt. 5:7). As was the case with both peacemaker and poor in spirit, some participants simply noted the word, “Mercy,” and others were more descriptive about the possible impact of mercy on their lives, “Being judgmental and critical is not mercy,” and “I need to show mercy to receive mercy.”

Table 4.3. Percentage of Truths from Responses (N=119)

Prominent Truth Topic	% of 119
Blessed are the Peacemakers	29
Blessed are the Poor in Spirit	29
Blessed are the Merciful	27

Question 31 posed the question, “Which of the seven Spiritual Formation Emphasis did you have the most difficulty understanding?” Question 33 asked, “Which of the seven Spiritual Formation Emphasis did you have the most difficulty experiencing?” Only 4 percent noted any difficulty with understanding truth, and only 7 percent referenced any difficulty with experiencing truth in regard to their spiritual formation (see Table 4.2). The low number of participants who had difficulty either understanding or experiencing truth offered some explanation as to why truth received the highest Likert mean score, 4.24. A comment by one of the participants of my small group may have been indicative of the perspective of persons who had been Christian for a while, and the possible cause of their perceived comfort with Truth: “We’ve heard these truths for years.” Since many had “heard these truths for years,” they may have felt a simple one- or two-word summary was sufficient.

Over the course of the study, I debriefed with the small group leaders in order to ascertain the dynamics and impact of the SFE study on the various small groups. Near the midpoint of his small group’s study, one leader shared with me there were a few participants who stated that, as far as their spiritual formation was concerned, they were not “[G]leaning a great deal of new knowledge from the study.” Though the ones who claimed they were not gleaning new information was a very small percentage of those who completed questionnaires, a few (4.4 percent) stated on the questionnaire they had

not acquired any new truths in regard to their spiritual formation. One said, “I have not heard anything I hadn’t heard before.” Another was more unresponsive than unenlightened, “Nothing has challenged me.”

Despite the small number who perceived few or no new truths, many of the participants offered comments at the end of the questionnaire, as well as on the reflective statements, that seemed to indicate the participants did perceive some experience and engagement with new spiritual formation truths over the course of the study:

The Truth-to-Fruit requires that a person is actively involved in his relationship with Christ. This process constantly moves one outside of his comfort zone in order to go beyond just knowing the truth and be used by Christ and then transformed by Christ.

The truth to life process tends to foster and grow rather than assume understanding of Scriptural truth and relevance. I have found this approach to be very helpful to my own spiritual transformation and health as well as to that of the church.

One participant seemed to have had an epiphany regarding the necessity in his spiritual formation to move beyond just knowing truths and intentionally progress toward genuine transformation:

The toughest thing for most Christians is not to know the truths – we can read about them, memorize scripture, etc.—but it is the application of them daily in our lives. And applying them is not always pleasant. Costs can be tremendous, steps are hard to take and transformation can be painful. This process is never sugar-coated at The River.

Though the majority of answers directly or indirectly referenced the Beatitudes, (63 percent of the 119 responses given were directly related to a specific beatitude), the range of truths was not limited to only those truths that would possibly be self-evident from reading the Beatitudes. For example, during a session on the topic of rejoicing in the midst of persecution (Matt. 5:10-12), a participant in my small group felt the Spirit laying

on his heart to deal with his own lack of forgiveness toward his neighbor. Over the course of the conversation, another participant shared that she was feeling a strong conviction to take the first step toward reconciling a broken relationship. Still another participant shared that, as far as his spiritual formation was concerned, he was feeling a “gentle tug” to finally receive forgiveness from God for some of his own sins toward others. In the same conversation, another wrestled with regret for what “might have been” in his life had it not been for the bad decisions of others.

Some of the other non-Beatitude related responses to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire were, “Knowing one’s sins truly helps one know how amazing God’s grace is,” or, “I need to surrender every day so that God can use me.” One participant noted that the truth that most impacted his life was, “I need to have a relationship with God despite my circumstances.”

Despite the variety in both my small group and questionnaire responses—variety beyond a simple reference to the Beatitudes—eighty-three percent of the participants shared at least one truth that could be grouped into one of three categories: (1) those having to do with the transformation of *oneself* (80 percent), (2) the transformation of some aspect of one’s relationships with *others* (56 percent), and (3) the transformation of one’s relationship or perception of *God* (31 percent; see Table 4.4). Of the 80 percent who referenced truths that struggle with a self-focused spiritual formation, some were as simple as “Pure in heart” (24 percent), and others were more definitive, “Deny self in order to find life.” Those who made up the 56 percent who referenced a truth regarding others predominantly noted either peacemaker or merciful. Truths related to “others” also included, “Love my neighbor,” “Forgive those who harmed me,” and telling others about

God: “Salt.” The truths relating to one’s spiritual formation regarding one’s relationship or perception of God were much broader in that some simply noted “God is real,” or “Let God lead,” while others were more situationally specific, “Suffering and persecution are a part of belonging to God,” and “I need to give God the glory no matter what.”

Table 4.4 alludes to not only a categorization of the referenced truths, but also a prominent thread I observed running through many of the participants’ open-ended answers to truth. The thread seemed to consist of three elements: 1. truth relevant to self, 2. truth relevant to one’s relationship with God and surrendered to God’s control, and 3. truth relevant to one’s relationship with others and being used by God to reach out to others. One person illustrated the thread when he wrote, “1. Pure in heart, 2. Meek, 3. Peacemakers.” Like many in the study, this participant was noting the Spirit speaking to him about spiritual formation in light of his need of a change of heart, in order to surrender his life to God’s control—being meek, so that he could eventually become a peacemaker, making a difference in the world around him. One participant best articulated the flow of the thread of spiritual formation from truths relevant to oneself in relationship with Christ toward the natural outcome of truths dealing with one’s relationship with others:

This is why The River will thrive; we don’t exist just for our members and to keep “us” happy and content. We exist for those outside of ourselves, while at the same time, lives within the membership of The River are continually being challenged with truths and undergoing constant transformation.

As will be noted in some of the other SFE elaborations, the self-God-others thread—though varying in the percentage breakdown of the three—was a recurring theme.

Table 4.4. Participants who provided at least One Truth under the Categories of Self, Others, and God.

Category	%
Self	80
Others	56
God	31

Findings Regarding Cost

The mean score of participants' Likert scale questions regarding cost was 3.45 on a scale ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high) (see Table 4.2, p. 121). In the questionnaire, a score of 3 was given to the Likert scale word "Neutral" or "Periodically." "Neutral" was the word used in question 5, "I have been challenged to honestly examine the costs of a relationship with God?" "Periodically" was used in Question 6, "During or since the study, how often have you followed God's leading despite the costs?" Hence the self-report of the cost score of 3.45 indicates that by the end of the study, the participants perceived a slightly higher level than "Neutral" or "Periodically" in their acknowledgement of or dealing with the costs of spiritual formation.

Cost of denying self. In contrast to the open-ended questions regarding truth, the responses to cost were not limited to reiterations of the Beatitudes. As Table 4.5 shows, when participants were asked to name three costs with which they had "been challenged most" in their spiritual formation, of the forty-one participants who provided at least one answer, the cost mentioned most often from the 113 responses was denying oneself (56 percent). Some participants simply stated, "Deny self," while others were more explicative, "The cost of denying myself. I stay so busy so I don't have the time take up my cross. It's sad," or "Having to give up what I know is a sin but is something that gives me great pleasure."

Table 4.5. Percentage of Challenging Costs from 113 Responses Provided

Challenging Cost	%
Deny Self	56
Relationship/friends/family	20
Pride	17
Forgive Others	17
Possible Persecution	12.5
Deny Self + Pride	73

I found it challenging to adequately categorize participants' responses in order to quantify specific groupings without losing the intent and heart of the respective costs. I often had to use my own discretion to differentiate between costs that specifically used the word "self" or "me," and others that expressly referenced familiar terms that implied "self" or "me." For example, 17 percent of the participants specifically referenced "Pride" as being a challenging cost toward their spiritual formation. Others alluded to the symptoms of pride, "What others think," or "My need for independence or being in control." However, "pride" and "deny self" are costs related to the same root focus, self. Therefore, when I combined the number of participants who noted "Pride" as a challenging cost to their spiritual formation with those who referenced costs related to "Deny Self," the result was 73 percent of the 113 responses stated the most significant sacrifice standing between where they were and genuine spiritual formation was their own self-centered foci. The 73 percent represents the percentage of all 113 responses. Of the forty-one participants who offered at least one response to a challenging cost, the percentage of those challenged by self-centered costs rises. As Table 4.6 shows, 90 percent noted in at least one of their answers that dealing with the sacrifice of "Self" was a challenge toward their spiritual formation. The self-centered costs were articulated in a variety of ways:

In the big scheme of things I don't have control of the big picture.

Looking for the guarantee of success vs. being faithful despite the outcome.

Having to give up what I know is a sin but is something that gives me great pleasure.

Acknowledge my brokenness.

Setting myself to be taken advantage of by showing mercy.

Being grateful in times of perceived suffering.

Realize the depth of my sin, then realizing I am forgiven. He took it to the cross PTL.

The last response appeared to be a mixture of the difficulty of self sacrifice tempered by the promise of forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

Table 4.6. Participants who provided at least One Cost under the Categories of Self, Others, and God

Category	%
Self	90
Others	58
God	19.5

During a particular session of my small group, one young and obviously frustrated lady blurted out, "Okay, so we're supposed to deny ourselves. What does that mean?" The rest of the group gave her a response that communicated that her frustration was shared by many in the room. According to the small group leader's debriefing sessions, the discussions in their groups likewise often dealt with the specific meaning for "Deny self." The topic of denying oneself possibly became a regular discussion item in the small groups due to the frequent references in the SFE curriculum to Jesus' admonition to take up one's cross and deny self in order to follow him (Luke 9:23).

During times when my small group was able to go beyond the side issues of semantics and delve deeper into understanding the implications of “deny self,” participants revealed the intricacies of their perceptions of the cost of denying oneself when they shared they were “afraid of being harmed,” or of being “taken advantage of.” When the conversation moved in that direction, it was clear many in the group had experienced some degree of harm from others. These honest self-revelations often led to discussions about how one could distinguish between fear as a healthy, God-given, self-preservation mechanism, and fear as a response to the possible loss of self-centered needs and wants. In light of his own cost-related spiritual formation issue, one small group participant asked, “When is ‘deny myself’ a healthy surrender of myself to serve others in God’s name, and when do I become a door-mat for the rest of the world?” A similar sense of frustration, ambiguity, and fear was expressed by the participant who noted in an open-ended questionnaire question, “Giving everything to God and losing control is scary. Putting everything into practice is difficult,” or the participant who stated, “We’re not used to hearing about the cost of discipleship. We’re used to hearing about the promises.”

Costs dealing with relationships with others. Similar to the categorical breakdown found with truth, the second largest grouping of costs that participants perceived as a challenge toward their spiritual formation had to do with their relationships with others (see Table 4.5). Approximately 20 percent of the 113 responses offered dealt specifically with “Relationships,” “Family,” or “Friends.” As with many of the other responses, some participants communicated the challenge in one word, “Family.” Others were more descriptive, “Willingly getting involved with others,” or

“Conflict with my husband.” The concept of forgiving others was also one of the more frequently referenced costs in spiritual formation (17 percent) (see Table 4.5).

Of the forty-one participants who offered at least one open-ended response, 58 percent alluded to a circumstance or situation related to others as being one of the more challenging costs they faced toward genuine spiritual formation (see Table 4.6). Some participants used comparative imagery to communicate their struggle, such as, “Peacemaker vs. sword.” Some responded, “Thinking of others before thinking of me.” Still, others simply wrote, “Being merciful & forgiving.”

Costs dealing with God. After weeks of recurring discussions in my small group about the specifics of what it meant to deny self, the group finally concluded that a major challenging cost toward genuine spiritual formation was the sacrifice inherent in moving from a mindset focused on one’s own agenda toward a focus on God’s agenda: “[Y]our kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). On the questionnaire, one participant articulated the insight this way, “Relinquishing my agenda for God’s agenda.”

“Relinquishing my agenda for God’s agenda” illustrated one of the other three major cost categories noted by participants toward their spiritual formation: a trusting perception of God (see Table 4.6). One participant noted, “I’m not really sure I can trust God.” My small group shared the same statement. When the small group member admitted to having trouble trusting God, the groups’ response was an immediate recognition of the same struggle in their own lives. When asked to elaborate on what he meant by not being able to “trust God,” the person said he acknowledged Jesus’ promise that those who were willing to lose their lives for him would in turn find life (Luke 9:24).

“But,” he went on, “What if God’s idea of life for me isn’t good enough for me? Or what if I give up what I have now and God doesn’t come through?” Though the essence of the cost with which the young man contended was self-centered—will I acquire from God what I want—an underlying aspect of that question is, “Is God trustworthy.” Nineteen percent of the responses given regarding cost communicated some ambiguity regarding God’s trustworthiness.

As was the case with truth, cost also possessed a uniting thread or progression of self, God, and others. One participant articulated the progressive thread in its completeness when he referenced his three most challenging costs toward spiritual formation, “(1) Surrender of self, (2) Out of comfort zone, (3) Focus on others.” Though few participants articulated all three categories, and only a few expressed them in the specific order of self, God, and others, every responding participant referenced at least one of the three: (1) “Surrender of Self” —the cost of denying self, (2) “Out of comfort zone”—the cost of trusting God, or (3) “Focus on others” —the cost of spiritual formation leading to vulnerability.

The challenge of dealing with the costs related to self, God, and others can be daunting and confusing. As Table 4.2 shows (see p. 121), though participants did not perceive cost as the most difficult to understand or experience, it was ranked the third most difficult to understand (16 percent of participants) and the second most difficult to experience (18 percent of participants). The fact that participants perceived cost as being difficult to understand and experience provides some insight as to why cost received the second lowest Likert mean score of 3.45 (second only to step).

Findings Regarding Hunger

The mean score of participants' Likert scale questions regarding hunger was 3.6 on a scale ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high) (see Table 4.2, p. 121). In the questionnaire, a score of 3 was given to the Likert scale word "Neutral," i.e., "I have been encouraged to examine my level of desire for a deeper encounter with God and realization of His truth in my life" (Question 11). Hence, the self-report of the hunger score of 3.6 indicates that by the end of the study, participants' perception of their hunger for spiritual formation was slightly higher than "Neutral."

The segment of the questionnaire that focused on hunger sought to ascertain the level of desire participants possessed toward growing in one's relationship with Christ. Though one's level of desire was primarily articulated in conjunction with a specific truth of the gospel, the findings and observations relevant to hunger dealt with spiritual formation in general. Simply put, I was trying to find out how much each participant wanted a deeper relationship with God and what might be hindering one's level of desire for that relationship. The open-ended question regarding hunger stated, "I have recognized the following as the top three things in my life that may hinder my hunger for God."

The hindrance of self. As was the case with both truth and cost, participants' open-ended responses to what may be hindering their hunger for God could also be generally organized into three categories. Unlike truth and cost, "God" was rarely referenced as a hindrance toward hunger for God. Hence, the three categories of referenced hindrances toward hunger for God were Self, Time, and Relationships. Of the three times God was referenced (2.5 percent of the 119 responses provided), the

responses varied from, “Fear of God,” and “Not find satisfaction in God,” to “I don’t trust God will come through.”

However, like truth and cost, “Self” was the most frequently referenced hindrance in one’s spiritual formation toward one’s desire to be in a deeper relationship with God. As Table 4.7 shows, 74 percent of the forty-two participants who provided at least one answer to the open-ended question regarding hunger referenced self as an issue. Though not as high a representative percentage, 39 percent of the 119 answers given referenced issues of self-surrender and gratification as primary hindrances toward a greater desire for a relationship with God. Some participants simply listed “Self,” or “Flesh,” while others were much more pointed, “Temporary gratification,” “My own wants,” “Personal convenience,” “Wanting earthly things,” and “Complacent—not want to change.”

Table 4.7. Responses to Hindrances to Hunger for God

Category	% from possibly 119 Responses	% of 42 Participants who gave at least one answer from category
Self	39	74
Time	23	53
Relationships	13	31

Participants offered a number of responses that alluded to something deeper or broader than just selfishness or one’s desire to meet one’s own needs. The participant who answered, “Where will it end?” articulated the broader issue. The second open-ended answer for this participant was, “Weight of the world. I’m only one man.” Another participant said, “I’m afraid that if I care about anything, I’ll have to care about everything.” During one of the small group leader debriefings, the group agreed that

remarks such as these were indicative of their observation that some of the participants felt extended beyond their ability to give of themselves—or even *desire* to give of themselves—to anything or anyone else.

The hindrance of time. The second most frequently perceived hindrance toward an increased desire to grow in a relationship with God was “Time.” Whether it was the simple statement of “Time,” the frustration laden remark of, “The busy-ness of life,” or the matter of fact remark, “Distractions,” 53 percent of the forty-two participants who answered the open-ended question regarding hunger provided at least one answer regarding time (see Table 4.7). Similarly, 23 percent of the 119 answers given referenced issues of participants’ lack of time as having a direct impact on hindering their hunger for God.

Some of the participants provided responses that offered a more complete understanding of time as an issue hindering their hunger for spiritual formation. For example, one participant stated, “My issue is with instant gratification. I want it yesterday.” Time, in this instance, was not the time one would have to set aside to work on one’s spiritual formation but the assumed time for any effort extended toward spiritual formation to come to fruition. Another participant articulated an assumed consumption of time by writing, “I can’t allow myself to want God any more because I don’t have enough of me to go around.” The participant was noting the time it would take and the consequent work entailed to focus more on spiritual formation and one’s relationship with God. The participant apparently equated a growing relationship with God or spiritual formation with something that takes time away from an already overloaded life.

A combination of these two mind-sets motivated a participant in my small group, near the close of the session on hunger, to sigh heavily, “Let’s stop talking about our desire for God. It’s making me tired.” He was not alone, 22 percent of the participants who filled out the questionnaire noted that hunger was the most difficult SFE for them to understand (see Table 4.2, p. 121).

The hindrance of relationships. As was the case with both truth and cost, hunger also had its share of relational references. The answers ranged from, “What others think,” “Love home,” and “Need help with tolerance to mean people,” to “Friendships” and, “70x7,” a reference to Jesus’ statement to Peter that he should forgive others seventy times seven (Matt. 18:22). Thirty-one percent of all participants who answered the open-ended question regarding hunger provided at least one answer that dealt with relationship. Fifteen answers (13 percent) of the 119 answers given referenced relationship issues as a primary stumbling block toward a greater desire for a relationship with God (see Table 4.7).

Despite the difficulty various participants had fully understanding hunger as it related to spiritual formation, some participants did perceive a degree of growth in their desire to know God. One participant noted in his remarks at the close of the questionnaire, “My hunger for knowledge and increase in relationship with God has multiplied due to this study. Things are becoming more clear and my peace with things daily are due to my increased relationship with God.” One of the reflective statements noted, “Transformation does not just happen once, but is something that can happen over and over and over if we can hunger enough and take the often times painful steps to achieve it.”

Findings Regarding Promise

The mean score of participants' Likert scale questions regarding promise was 4.2 on a scale ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high) (see Table 4.2, p. 121). In the questionnaire, a score of 4 was given to the Likert scale word "Agree," (i.e., "Because of this study, I understand that every truth of God is accompanied by a promise;" Question 15). Hence the self-report of the promise score of 4.2 indicates that by the end of the study, participants agreed they had some degree of understanding and experience of the promises of specific truths of the gospel.

The segment of the questionnaire dealing with promise sought to discern participants' perception of their understanding and appreciation for the promises inherent in the truths of the gospel. The open-ended question regarding promise stated, "I have been encouraged to continue to grow in my relationship with God because of the following three promises I gleaned from this study." Participants had as easy a time referencing promises as they did articulating truths. In fact, the mean Likert scale score for promise was similar to that of truth. Likewise, the same low percentage of participants checked promise as those who checked truth as the most difficult SFE to understand or experience (4 and 7 percent respectively; see Table 4.2, p. 121).

As Table 4.8 shows, the promise most often referenced as that which encouraged participants in their spiritual formation was "Comfort" (27 percent). Some simply referenced "Comfort," or "Strength," others "Free from fear & troubles of this world," while others were encouraged by comfort offered in relation to particular earthly struggles, "We have the kingdom (the relationship) now, despite our circumstances."

Articulating the most encouraging promise in their faith journey, one participant quoted a popular Christian song, “Sometimes he calms the storm, other times he calms his child.”

Table 4.8. Percentage of Encouraging Promises from Responses (N=110)

Encouraging Promise	%
Comforted	27
Mercy	22
Peacemaker	22
Seeing God & Eternal life both	19.5
Mercy + Peacemaker	44

As was the case with the other SFE, many participants referenced relationship with others in response to the open-ended question regarding promises. The responses were mixed between what a promised change in the participant could bring to a relationship with someone else—being a peacemaker—and what a promised change in someone else could bring to a relationship with the participant:

That when I forgive, I am forgiven

Give mercy to receive mercy

Able to be a “peacemaker”

For they will be called sons of God

To be a good servant

To see others as God sees them

Approximately 44 percent of the 110 promises referenced dealt with mercy, peacemaking, or reconciliation in relationships (see Table 4.8).

In both truth and cost, self and others dominated the number of references. God-related truths and costs were typically the third most frequently referenced category.

However, with promise came an interesting reversal in percentages regarding self, others, and God-focused open-ended responses. Specifically, as Table 4.9 shows, 83 percent of those who responded gave at least one spiritual formation promise related directly to God, heaven, eternal life, or God working in someone's life. Some of the God-focused promises were given in rapid succession:

“He is God. He is merciful. He is just. He has paid the price. He is the great I am, the great healer. My redeemer. He is Lord. I will not give up in the race.”

“(1) God will comfort, (2) God is in control, (3) Heaven is the reward.”

“(1) We take a step, God will meet us, (2) God will provide, (3) God loves me.”

“(1) God's unconditional love, (2) His Mercy, (3) He'll use me for his kingdom.”

Others were simple statements of praise, “Life with God is better than without,” and “I will be forgiven.” Still other references were statements of hope and purpose:

“I am an instrument of God.”

“God can use me.”

“Experience something other than what I know now: My life will be transformed/different, Purpose for my life (when I follow Him), Hope.”

Participants found unique ways to articulate the importance of the God-related promises of the truths of the gospel.

Table 4.9. Encouraging Promises

Category	% from possibly 110 Responses	% of 41 Participants who gave at least one answer from category
God	48	83
Self	35	63
Others	8	20

Participants communicated the self-focused promises (35 percent off the 110 responses) in a variety of ways. Some simply said, “I can know genuine transformation.” Others were a little more precise, “Losing control is not so bad,” “I can know freedom,” and “Peace regardless of the circumstances.” Those who perceived some level of encouragement from other-focused promises were as equally diverse in how they articulated them. Some stated, “To see others as God sees them.” Others wrote, “That when I forgive, I am forgiven.” One practical-minded participant wrote, “More money for showing mercy.” As Table 4.9 shows, 20 percent of the forty-one participants who offered at least one response to promises, referenced promises dealing with their relationships with others.

Despite the magnitude of the current preaching of the gospel of prosperity, and the fact that 84 percent of the participants are frequently exposed to Christian material other than the SFE study, promises like money, wealth, and worldly prosperity were never mentioned as promises that encouraged participants to continue in their journey toward a deeper relationship with God.

Findings Regarding Step

The mean score of participants’ Likert scale questions regarding step was 3.4 on a scale ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high) (see Table 4.2, p. 121). In the questionnaire, a score of 3 was given to the Likert scale word “Neutral” or “Periodically.” “Neutral” was used for Question 18, “Over the course of the study, I have recognized that I can take an active part in God’s transformation in my life.” Question 19, “Weekly I found myself following through with the steps that I had written,” utilized the word “Periodically.”

Hence the self-report of the Step score of 3.4 indicates that by the end of the study, the participants perceived a slightly higher level than “Neutral” or “Periodically” in their acknowledgement of or struggles with the steps necessary toward experiencing genuine spiritual formation.

The segment of the questionnaire regarding step sought to uncover how actively engaged each participant was in processing, writing down, and taking the steps necessary in spiritual formation. The open-ended question regarding Step was, “The following are the top three steps I have committed to in order to continue growing in my relationship with God.” Of the forty-one participants, 49 percent referenced “Prayer” or “Quiet time with God” as their next step (see Table 4.10). Approximately 23 percent referenced taking part in some form of intentional Bible study as one of the three steps they felt the Spirit leading them to take toward spiritual formation. In other words, 72 percent of the forty-one participants referenced one of two major disciplines of Christianity. A possible reason for the 72 percentile reference to Bible reading and prayer was best communicated by the reflective statement that read, “Bible study and prayer have been emphasized throughout the church. I guess if we’re supposed to produce fruit from The Vine, it’s a good thing we’re focusing on those things that keep us connected to The Vine.”

Table 4.10. Committed Steps toward Transformation

Category	% from possibly 120 Responses	% of 41 Participants who gave at least one answer from category
Prayer and Quiet Time	19	49
Bible	13	23
Witnessing	7	16

Though 72 percent of the participants noted either prayer or reading the Bible as one of their steps, those responses made up only 32 percent of the 120 steps referenced in the open-ended question. The other responses to committed steps ranged from the third most often cited step of “Witnessing” (7 percent), to “Confess my sins,” and “Being more and more open to the Holy Spirit working in my life.” The remaining 61 percent of the responses to committed steps were difficult to code or categorize into any logical format. Some were directly related to articulated costs. For example, the referenced step of “Setting aside time for God,” was shared by one of the participants challenged with the cost of time. The step, “Letting my God-light shine,” was referenced by the participant challenged with the cost of sharing the good news with others. The frustration at trying to grasp the diversity of specific steps for each individual person may have best been communicated by the participant who noted his difficulty with step by stating, “[Y]ou have to think it through and it takes time to listen for and discern God’s voice.”

The most consistent observation gleaned from the questionnaire’s open-ended responses, reflection statements, my own small group, and journal entries based on leader debriefings was participants tended to have a more difficult time following through with step than most of the other SFE. As one person noted in the original fall leadership development small group about a month after step was added to the SFE study, “I liked it better when all we had to do was think about it and nothing was expected of us.” The perceived difficulty with step provides some explanation as to why step received the lowest Likert Scale score (3.44) and held a consistent rank among all of the SFE as one of the most difficult to understand and experience (see Table 4.2, p. 121).

Though some of the specific Likert answers on the questionnaire and the calculated overall scores explained in Chapter 3 have no statistical connection, participants' answers to the question, "Weekly I found myself following through with the steps that I had written" (Question 20) appeared to have a connection with how high participants scored on their overall scores. Those who "Never" followed through had a mean overall score of 105. Those who "Very Frequently" followed through had a mean overall score of 130. Again, stating these mean scores is not to propose any correlation but simply to point out an impression on my part that those who took the step aspect of the SFE seriously perceived a greater degree of impact in the SFE focus than those who did not. The person who wrote in his reflective statement, "Though I didn't enjoy the step process, it was the part that ignited the fire in me," somewhat substantiated this connection.

Findings Regarding Transformation

The mean score of participants' Likert scale questions regarding transformation was 4.1 on a scale ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high) (see Table 4.2, p. 121). In the questionnaire, a score of 4 was given to the Likert scale word "Agree," (i.e., "Since this study, I have experienced transformation in my relationship with God;" Question 22). Hence the self-report of the transformation score of 4.1 indicates that by the end of the study, the consensus of the participants was that as a whole they agreed they had perceived some level of transformation in their spiritual formation. However, even though transformation had the third highest mean Likert score, 20 percent of participants noted it was the hardest of the SFE to experience. Some equated transformation with change and thus stated succinctly, "Change is difficult." Others were more descriptive

with their explanation of the difficulties of transformation, “Transformation comes by moving out of a place of complacency and being uncomfortable. Therefore, it’s the most difficult.”

Transformation in regard to others. The segment of the questionnaire dealing with transformation sought to articulate areas of transformation specific to each participant’s life in light of spiritual formation. The open-ended question regarding transformation was, “Since taking part in this study, my heart has been transformed in the following ways/areas.” The most frequently referenced area of transformation had to do with one’s relationship with others. Eighteen participants (55 percent) of the thirty-three participants who provided at least one response to the open-ended question stated that in the course of the study, their hearts had been transformed toward others (see Table 4.11). Similarly, out of the 86 responses given, 31 percent dealt with participants’ transformation toward others:

“Caring about the lost.”

“More merciful.”

“Mercy for those who don’t love me.”

“Peacemaker—trying to see things from another way. Keep my mouth shut.”

“More open to the needs of others.”

“Compassion for others.”

“Forgive others.”

“Aware of others who struggle.”

“Less judgmental.”

“Catching myself quickly when I begin to criticize.”

The way the assorted transformations were articulated was as varied as the transformations themselves.

Table 4.11. Experienced Transformation

Category	% from possibly 86 Responses	% of 33 Participants who gave at least one answer from category
Relationship with others	31	55
Humble/Less about self	25	45
God in my life	24	52

Near the midpoint of the small group sessions, I noted during one of the leader debriefings that a number of the participants were dealing with deep-seated hurts caused by others. One small group member stated, “It’s hard to let God transform your life when you’ve been hurt so badly in the past.” Another small group member remarked, “Sometimes it’s hard to trust God with the pain.” One participant’s response to the open-ended question regarding transformation offered a glimpse into the pain, “(1) Feelings towards others, (2) Mercy for those who don’t love me, (3) A desire to pray for those who don’t love me.”

In the above response, as with truth, cost, and promise, participants tended to weave together the same thread of a need or desire for transformation regarding relationships with others with a need to experience Spirit-enabled and empowered transformation in one’s own life. The sequence was repeated often in small group discussions and written responses:

I’ve been hurt by others and I have a hard time getting past the pain, i.e.
 “(1) Feelings towards others.”

I need to turn to God to change my heart toward those who caused the pain, i.e. “(3) A desire to pray for those who don’t love me.”

I will experience anew God’s mercy being poured out on me so that I can extend the same mercy to others, i.e. “(2) Mercy for those who don’t love me.”

The key emphasis was that, in order to genuinely experience transformation in one’s feelings toward others, God had to first bring about a transformation and healing in one’s heart.

Transformation in regard to self. The second most frequently referenced transformation of the eighty-six responses given had to do with transformation of oneself. Approximately 45 percent of those who offered at least one response (33 participants) noted at least one and often times two self-focused transformations they either needed to experience or perceived they had already experienced over the course of the study (see Table 4.11). As was the case with transformation toward others, the responses were varied:

“Recognized I’m poor in spirit.”

“I have seen how selfish I am.”

“Comfort at times of anxiety.”

“Less stressful.”

“Less about myself.”

“Less worry about trivial matters.”

“Moving from “It’s all about me.”

“I am more in tune with what the Holy Spirit is guiding me to do.”

“Judgmental heart to an understanding heart.”

“Self-centeredness changes to God and others-centeredness.”

One participant gave one of the more telling responses when she wrote simply, “Forgive me.”

“Forgive me” seemed to be an indicative statement of a positive cycle that appeared to be taking place over the course of the study. As participants were encouraged to be honest with themselves regarding the part they had played in their broken relationships and negative experiences in life (i.e., self-centered decisions, easily injured feelings due to pride or insecurity) because of that recognition and transformation they were enabled to respond to life and others in a more Christ-centered and God-glorifying way. Others in the groups, as well as those within the church at large, noticed a change in their lives. Their honest responses resulted in an increasingly healthy atmosphere of reconciliation and acceptance founded on a shift from “It’s all about me,” to, as one participant said, “I’m broken as well. I see what I’ve brought to the party.” Other participants spoke about the atmosphere:

This study has really helped me to become real with myself and more real with God.

Examination of ones self, to know how to change and to get out of the way to be a part of God’s work not your own. I could not have told you what that really meant before I came to The River.

These two reflective statements summarized the blossoming culture of humble acceptance.

Transformation in regard to God. Twenty responses (24 percent) alluded to transformation relating to one’s focus, connection with, or inclination toward God.

Likewise, fifty-two percent of those who offered at least one response to the open-ended question noted some transformation in their relationship with God (see Table 4.11). Some

participants stated simply they perceived they had been transformed toward being “More God-centered.” Others wrote, “More focus on surrendering to God’s will.” As noted earlier, a number of participants struggled with the issue of trusting God. They wrote simply, “Trusting God completely.” Encouragingly, some participants did perceive an increase in their heart’s ability to entrust themselves to God. One participant wrote, “I have opened my heart more to God.” Other participants articulated a first step toward understanding joy centered more on God than the circumstances of their lives. One participant said, “Being at peace with things that happen. I know that God is in control.”

Some of the participants who completed reflection statements noted the perception of change in their own lives:

There has been a true transformation in my life and many others.

I have never been one to read but now I read my Bible and other Christian books. I also have Bible Studies in my home, something I never thought I could do. I have grown so much as a Christian through this church.

Others noted the change in others:

It is amazing to see His transforming power. How reserved or “shy” people are slowly stepping up to serve. How a man who sat alone in the back with his arms crossed, finally came forward and found himself weeping and weeping at the altar. Only God could do that.

Only God could work through that type of transforming power.

Findings Regarding Fruit

One of the challenges in the SFE focus was trying to help participants understand the difference between transformation and the resulting fruit or outward manifestation of transformation. Approximately 18 percent of the participants noted that fruit was the second most difficult SFE to both understand and experience (see Table 4.2, p. 121). As was noted in the early stages of the SFE curriculum design, those who took part in the

early stages of the SFE focus and who eventually became leaders, had a difficult time distinguishing between transformation and fruit. When step was added, some of the eventual leaders had even more confusion. The roadblock to gaining a clear grasp on the difference was articulated by one of the leaders who said, “My trouble is not understanding it. My trouble is that I’ve never thought about it in these terms. I was brought up to just ‘do’ [bear fruit]. It never occurred to me that there was a reason or a cause behind it other than my trying harder.”

In order to ascertain how well the eventual curriculum enabled participants to grasp the distinction between transformation and fruit, I inserted an open-ended question in the questionnaire. In the section of the questionnaire regarding fruit, a Likert question was posed, “Since taking part in the study, I have a better grasp of the difference between fruit and heart transformation” (Question 25). Immediately following Question 25 was the open-ended statement, “I understand that difference as.” Seventy-eight percent of those who provided a response (82 percent of the 45 participants) were able to articulate the difference as it had been described in the SFE small group curriculum; Fruit is the outflow of genuine transformation. However, how the participants distinguished transformation from fruit varied:

“Transformation is the change within. Fruit is what’s produced from the change.”

“Fruit is the outward product of internal change in the heart.”

“Fruits is the truth being realized in my life through a transformation of the heart.”

“Transformation is what happens in me as a result of following the truth. The fruit is what flows from that.”

“Fruit is what naturally begins to flow out of my life ... not me doing it, but God living in me.”

“Heart transformation is the change in me. The fruit is the result.”

“Heart transformation is complete surrender to God. Fruit is the outcome/evidence.”

“Fruit is what is born after transformation occurs in your heart—if we truly changed the fruit will naturally bear.”

Those who uniquely noted the necessity of an inner transformation brought about by the Holy Spirit said, “You can change and not be transformed, but you cannot be transformed and not change, “ and “I tried and tried to use my strength to bear this FRUIT, but it didn’t last. It is impossible for me to bear Fruit after I have just known the Truth.”

Though 78 percent seemed to be able to at least reiterate the language and semantics used in the SFE curriculum, the apparent struggle with fully grasping the concept of fruit continued throughout the breadth of the study. Representative of that struggle was the mean score of participants’ Likert scale questions regarding fruit. The mean score was 3.5 on a scale ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high) (see Table 4.2, p. 121). In the questionnaire, a score of 3 was given to the Likert scale word “Neutral” (i.e., “Since taking part in the study, I have a better grasp of the difference between fruit and heart transformation”; Question 25). Hence the self-report of the Fruit score of 3.5 indicates that by the end of the study, the participants’ perception of their understanding or experience of Fruit was slightly higher than “Neutral” regarding specific truths of the gospel and their own spiritual formation.

The segment of the questionnaire regarding fruit sought to identify specific manifestations in each participant's life in the context of a specific gospel truth. The open-ended question regarding fruit was, "Since taking part in this study, the following are the top three fruits that are now being manifested in my life." The order of the top three fruits was the same as that for transformation. Thirty participants (66 percent) noted an other-focused fruit as at least one of their open-ended responses. (see Table 4.12). The second most frequently referenced fruit dealt with visible changes in oneself (58 percent). The third most referenced fruit dealt with fruit in relationship to God (42 percent).

Table 4.12. Categories of Manifested Transformation, Fruit

Category out of 36 Participants	%
Peace/Forgiveness/kindness - Other-focused	66
Self actualization	58
God-focused	42

Participants who indicated other-focused fruit wrote remarks such as, "Keeping peace with others," "Lifted burden from hard relationships," "I am more forgiving, less critical," and, "Compassion (more) for others." Those who indicated self-focused fruit made observations such as, "I worry much less," "Rejoice, even in suffering," and, "I finally realized that God can calm the waters, or his child. Both, or neither." A few participants seemed to summarize the ongoing thread of one's life being transformed by God ultimately leading to a manifestation of reconciled relationships with the world by describing the manifested fruit, "Love, intentionally recognizing that Jesus is not 'out there,' but inside me: greater is he that is in me than he that is in the world," and

“Showing (giving) mercy through Holy Spirit, patience; surrendering daily to his desires not mine.”

Summary to Research Question 1

The following quotes were offered by participants in the concluding open-ended “Comments” section of the questionnaire:

My personal relationship with God has grown.

This has helped to spur me on the journey & to reignite the fire.

I knew I was in the infant start of my walk with God, but I feel I’ll be heading in the right direction’

There are reasons for everything, & this study showed me that my time for intentional transformation is here: obedience to God’s Word; sowing & reaping in prayer & finances; growing in love as my faith grows also.

These comments provide a summational glimpse to research question 1, “In what ways did the participants’ self-reports of their spiritual formation at the completion of the study reflect the spiritual formation emphases presented in the eight week study?”

Research Question 2

The second Research question was, “What evidence of spiritual growth and development was observed in the church plant across the time frame in which participants were engaged in the spiritual formation emphasis, culminating in the one year anniversary of the first public worship?” In order to provide insights into this question, three of the four primary data sources were utilized: The reflection statements, my own journal entries, and the statistical data of the new church.

Though this case study did not establish a direct correlation regarding the direct effect of the focus on the SFE and the growth and development of the church plant, some assumptions can be made based on the perceptions of those who took part in the study

and who were a part of the church plant from its inception. The majority of those perceptions are represented in three categories: (1) perceived spiritual growth, (2) perceived importance of the focus on the SFE on the church as a whole, (3) perceived strength of the foundation of the church.

Perceived Spiritual Growth

This study did not propose to provide a statistical correlation or proof that a focus on spiritual formation had a direct causal effect on The River's average weekly attendance. However, evidences are available that would support a possible assertion that spiritual growth and development have occurred within the church plant during the period in which participants were engaged in the spiritual formation emphasis. The following were some of the more significant statements of perceived spiritual growth and development as stated on the Reflection Statements:

What a blessing it has been to experience the growth of a new church

The Truth-to-Fruit model has had a tremendous impact on my life. I think it is safe to say that the model has had a very big impact on the spiritual growth and health of The River.

Within the overall breadth of The River, the Truth-to-Fruit methodology has served to inspire and foster spiritual enthusiasm, growth in the faith, joy, and understanding, individually and as a body. By God's grace, it is working.

I can feel the Holy Spirit moving in this place. I have been there from the beginning watching the church body grow in spirit

The best-stated sentiment regarding the perception of what God has done in light of spiritual growth and development was articulated by the participant who wrote, "Wow! What a ride it has been, never in my mind would I think as little as over a year ago could one's life change so much and to see The River come alive." One participant stated

succinctly the general perception of what God was doing at The River when he wrote simply, “The transformation of hearts, minds, and lives can be seen in many lives.”

Perceived Importance of the Focus on the SFE

As was the case regarding any direct correlation between the intentional focus on the SFE and the spiritual growth of the church as a whole, this study was not designed to definitively assert that the focus on the SFE was directly responsible for creating a foundational atmosphere of growth and development in the church. However, the consensus perception of those who submitted reflection statements was the focus on the SFE (known as the “Truth-to-Fruit process” throughout the small groups) had a positive effect on establishing a foundation that fostered spiritual growth and development:

The study is very valuable, and the "truth-to-fruit" process will be very useful outside of the study. The key is how the user uses it. The more it is used, the more the user, his surrounding, and the kingdom will benefit.

The Truth-to-Fruit requires that a person is actively involved in his relationship with Christ. This process constantly moves one outside of his comfort zone in order to be used by Christ and then transformed by Christ. It's also about reaching others for Christ in and outside of the walls of the church. It is a great foundation for a church to be intentional about being a true Body of Christ.

To date, I believe that the truth, cost, promise, step, transformation, to fruit methodology has served The River very effectively.

The Truth-to-Fruit process is also important to the spiritual health of The River because it provides a continual way to grow in your relationship with Christ.

Examination of ones self, to know how to change and to get out of the way to be a part of God's work not your own. I could not have told you what that really meant before I came to “The River.” Learning the truth's of Jesus Christ and to truly hunger for not only his word but to have a true relationship with God.

The Truth-to-Fruit model is a way to be genuinely yourself. God knows who we are and He knows our heart. We don't have to be fake or false or

put on an act. By having this model as a basic teaching of The River in its infant stages, I think it has laid a strong foundation for the congregation to build their lives on honesty and genuineness.

Hence, the truth-to-fruit process has had some impact on the life and growth of The River. If nothing else, the continuous emphasis on humility, honesty, and genuineness—as reflected in the above quotes—helped create an atmosphere where persons were encouraged and equipped to delve into the often-times unexplored recesses of their relationships with God and struggle with aspects of that relationship that may not have, up to that time, been dealt with adequately. Based on some of the open-ended responses, one could make an argument that honest and accepting dialogue could be a catalyst for growth, though not a guarantee of growth.

Many of the participants seemed to benefit from having a venue in which they could honestly articulate the costs with which they struggled. Within the dynamics of an honest and vulnerable small group, participants received support and encouragement from fellow seekers on the journey. Some of the remarks in the Reflective statements said it well:

Understanding the costs involved and being constantly cognizant of our resistance to paying these costs will help us to push forward and do what we know is the right thing to do and the thing that is God's will.

The Truth-to-Fruit model is a way to be genuinely yourself. God knows who we are and He knows our heart. We don't have to be fake or false or put on an act. By having this model as a basic teaching of The River in its infant stages, I think it has laid a strong foundation for the congregation to build their lives on honesty and genuineness.

Examination of oneself, to know how to change and to get out of the way to be a part of God's work not your own. I could not have told you what that really meant before I came to The River.

I think the model has had a big influence on the congregation and helped us to be ourselves. Once we can take off the masks and be ourselves and

let other people know that we are not perfect, I think people will see that God is real and will come to The River to meet Him.

Though I was unable to find any statistical evidence to corroborate this assumption, the focus of The River on being a place of acceptance and connection, coupled with the need for mending relational dynamics (articulated in the previous material regarding Research question 1), may have played a part in the numeric growth of The River over the first year. As one person noted, “The River UMC is a healthy, vibrant church. Through God, prayer and intentional growth, the core values are noticeable in attendees of the church. Transformation of hearts, minds, and lives can be seen in many lives.”

Perceived Strength of the Foundation of the Church

A final possible argument for a positive interpretation of the effect of an intentional focus on the SFE on the spiritual growth and development of the church is the oft-time expectation-filled perspective of what many perceived God has in store for the people of The River. My assumption is persons often assume the future holds something similar to what they have experienced in the past. Though not always the case, persons would most likely find it difficult to be enthusiastic about the promise of what lies ahead when one has experienced nothing but disappointment in the past. If that premise is true, then the following quotes from the reflection statements and the comment section of the questionnaire demonstrate participants’ perception of what has been in light of their belief of what will be:

It’s also about reaching others for Christ in and outside the walls of the church. It is a great foundation for a church to be intentional about being a true Body of Christ. This is why The River will thrive; we don’t exist just for our members and to keep “us” happy and content. We exist for those outside of ourselves, while at the same time, lives within the membership of The River are continually being challenged with truths and undergoing constant transformation.

Most of us realize that our own spiritual growth and the growth of the body of Christ won't happen on its own and if we are truly committed to making a difference, we have to take the steps necessary to accomplish what the Lord is calling us to do.

My belief is that The River will benefit from each person who reads and studies Truth-to-Fruit, prays consistently and honestly for guidance, and keeps the findings, no matter how difficult, in the front of their minds and their everyday lives.

The River will remain a true Body of Christ if the emphasis is kept on Truth-to-Fruit because the congregation will be Jesus to others because they will, by God's grace, live out his truths.

As long as we do not become complacent in our Christianity and or growth as believers, the River will grow the numbers –not number of “cheeks in the seats,” but the number of lives truly transformed in Jesus Christ. With our eyes on the truth, hunger to change, courage to face the costs, and the heart to take the steps, we have and will continue to experience this awesome transformation; one person at a time.

Like the little boy tossing stranded star-fish back into the ocean, when asked if his efforts were making a difference, could only respond, “It makes a difference to this one.” The same is true for any measurable impact a focus on the SFE has had on the church as a whole. Though I can only conjecture about the overall effect, I can safely point to one more soul, having been picked up off the sandy shore, and say, “It apparently mattered to this one,” and then trust that it will matter to the next, and to the next.

Research Question 3

The third Research question guiding this study was, “What were some of the contextual, situational, and perceptual factors that may have had a perceived impact on the effect of the spiritual formation emphases on the persons taking part in this study?” In order to provide insights into this question, I utilized three of the four primary data

sources: the researcher-designed questionnaire, the reflection statements, and my own journal entries.

In Chapter 3, I explained how I obtained an overall score for every participant. As I noted in Chapter 3, these scores have not been statistically substantiated, nor can any definitive correlation be obtained or suggested by using the overall scores. However, I made some comparison of the overall mean scores of various groupings of participants simply to shed some possible light on the information gleaned from the reflection statements and my journal observations. Table 4.13 reflects the overall mean scores of those who indicated the lowest and the highest Likert scale ratings for different groupings. This low/high breakdown applies to every grouping except gender, small group participation, and open-ended questions 21 and 24.

Table 4.13. Grouping Comparisons

Demographic/Perspective	Lowest Rating	Score	Highest Rating	Score	% Difference
Gender	Male	114	Female	118	3.6
Life Condition	Stressed	116	Very Enjoyable	121	4.3
Job Condition	Very Stressed	112	Very Enjoyable	121	8
Education	High School	107	College and above	119	11
Length of Christian walk	Year or less	112	30 Years +	119	6.2
Health	Neutral	108	Very Good	119	10
Other Christian Material	Never	100	Very Frequently	120	20
Small Group	No	108	Yes	118	9.25
Q1 - New Truths	Strongly Disagree	103	Strongly Agree	122	18.4
Q5 - Costs	Strongly Disagree	114	Strongly Agree	120	5.3
Q11 - Hunger	Disagree	110	Strongly Agree	127	15.4
Q21 - Steps answered	None	105	Three	130	23.8
Q24 - Trans answered	None	101	Three	122	20.8
Q27 - Exper Transformation	Strongly Disagree	103	Strongly Agree	129	25.24

Time and Stress

In the presentation of the case study findings regarding Research question 1, under the section that dealt with hunger, I noted the reoccurring themes of time, busyness, and distractions as a thread that 53 percent of the participants referenced at least once (see Table 4.7, p. 134). Participants referenced time related issues in response to the open-ended question, “I have recognized the following as the top three things in my life that may hinder my hunger for God.” In light of that finding, I suspected comparisons of life condition, job condition, and health would have a *more* significant difference in the overall scores between those who were stressed and those who were not. Although those with favorable job conditions and health did have an 8 percent and 10 percent higher overall score respectively than those who did not, the difference did not seem to support the impact of time and stress noted in research question 1. The comparison certainly did not reflect the weekly feedback from small group participants. Weekly feedback provided the clearest window into the impact of time and stress on participants’ ability to effectively work through the SFE. On numerous occasions in my small group, members arrived having had to quickly read the material just prior to group. They would often apologize, and just as often cite that job or family distractions had kept them from being able to engage the material.

Christian Material

A 20 percent difference in overall mean scores exhibited between those who never exposed themselves to other Christian material other than the SFE curriculum and those who very frequently did engage other Christian material (see Table 4.13). In my journal, I noted early in the small group process that those who read other Christian

material possessed two advantages in processing the SFE encounter over those who did not. First, there was a familiarity with the language, with the Bible, and with the concepts inherent in an in-depth discussion of faith. Second, those who frequently read other Christian material were experienced at thoughtful introspection. The ability to take part in thoughtful introspection was important in that early in the design of the SFE curriculum I realized I had assumed an ability and willingness toward in-depth processing of one's thoughts and feelings.

Hunger and Step

I discovered the more pronounced differences between the low and high Likert scale scores were not found when I compared the demographic or life condition groups, rather when I compared those groups differentiated by how they answered specific questions on the questionnaire. For example, those who responded with "Strongly Agree" to the statement, "I have been encouraged to examine my level of *desire* for a deeper encounter with God and realization of His truth in my life" (question 11) scored 15.4 percent higher overall than those who disagreed with that statement (see Table 4.13). Statements from participants such as, "I never recognized how much desire played a roll in my relationship with God," and "I want to want God more," were indicative of that difference. These participants were more apt to work their way through the numerous distractions of everyday life in order to seek a deeper, more secure grasp of the truth and the meaning of being transformed in light of that truth. One participant said, "Transformation does not just happen once, but is something that can happen over and over and over if we can hunger enough and take the often times painful steps to achieve it."

That quote supports another insight I observed over the course of the SFE study, as well as a possible implication from Table 4.13. As was noted earlier in Chapter 3, step was not originally a part of the SFE. I added step because not long into the process of designing and working through the SFE curriculum, the research team realized that without a step, the SFE process could easily become nothing more than an intellectual exercise. The dynamics and experiences of the later small groups supported that theory. Those who took step seriously were more apt to experience and talk about genuine transformation than those who did not. Table 4.13 notes the difference between those who took the time (step) to process and answer the open-ended question related to step and transformation. The difference between those who did not bother to offer one response and those who filled in all three options in the open-ended questions was 23.8 and 20.8 percent respectively.

Small Group

Table 4.13 notes a 9.25 percent difference between those who experienced the SFE in a small group and those who did not. However, my sense is that the difference was likely much more pronounced. In fact, participants offered comments at the close of a few questionnaires that strongly support the benefits of working through the SFE in the context of a small group. One participant suggested the SFE only be engaged via a small group experience. Though the particular participant offered no elaboration as to why a small group would be advantageous, based on my observations over the study period, small groups offered six influential aspects to the SFE encounter: (1) Accountability to read and come prepared to share, (2) An example of honesty and vulnerability on the part of others in the group, (3) Encouragement to truly deal with articulated struggles, (4) A

concrete step—being a part of a small group in the first place—toward deeper transformation, (5) An ongoing challenge to seek and follow through with concrete steps toward transformation, (6) A place to celebrate genuine transformation in the Holy Spirit.

Experiencing New Truths

A noteworthy Table 4.13 percentage disparity that I observed throughout the duration of the study was the perceived difference in growth between those who strongly agreed to the statement, “Over the course of this study, I have encountered a number of life challenging truths” (Question 1), and those who strongly disagreed. Those who agreed scored 18.4 percent higher than those who did not. Every small group leader had at least one story concerning a participant who started the study with the perception that he or she had little more to learn in regard to biblical knowledge and depth of faith. Those who believed they had nothing to learn and who already had a thorough grasp of the Bible were less likely to be vulnerable in the group, more likely to be condescending to those who genuinely sought to grow in their faith, and tended to be frustrated by the group’s propensity to spend so much time on the “surface Christianity of the beatitudes,” as one person put it, and not on the “meatier” aspects of Christian doctrine.

The demographic section of the questionnaire showed those who had been Christian for only a few years were as likely to be a part of the “already arrived” mindset as those who had been Christian for many years. As suggested in Table 4.13, I noticed very little if any significant difference between those who had been Christians for thirty years and those who were new to the faith. One of the key factors that tended to balance the effect of any other demographic category was how badly one wanted to grow deeper in one’s walk with God—Hunger

Summary of Major Findings

1. Participants perceived the focus on the SFE as having a positive effect on their own spiritual growth and development.
2. Participants perceived the focus on the SFE as having a positive effect on the new church's spiritual growth and development.
3. Participants perceived the atmosphere of acceptance and honest introspection that was put in place and fostered by the SFE process as being an important element in the growth and development of individuals and the church as a whole.
4. Participants articulated an ongoing thread of recognizing the need for oneself being transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit in order for the participant to be actively engaged in Christ-centered ministry to others.
5. Participants perceived various elements of the SFE as being overwhelming to some participants.
6. Those who actively took steps toward transformation perceived a greater degree of spiritual growth and development.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The impetus for this project was to help stem the tide of the 80 percent failure rate of new church plants. Church growth experts continue to suggest dynamic structures and innovative methodologies to help stop the hemorrhaging of struggling bodies of Christ. As Chapter 2 emphasized, many church plant authors point to strong core values as the key foundation for launching growing and lasting churches, yet realistically, something must inform the foundation of core values. Regardless of how well a church's core values may be stated, it takes surrendered hearts and obedient spirits facilitated by intentional spiritual formation for a church to not only survive but thrive. Hence, the motivation for this project was to study the effect of a specific spiritual formation emphasis on the spiritual growth and development of participants who were a part of a new church plant, as well as the concurrent patterns of the spiritual growth of the church plant.

Major Findings

The major findings focused predominantly on the participants' perceived effect of the SFE on their spiritual growth, and the perceived effect of the individual growth on the growth of the church plant

The Perceived Effect of an SFE Focus on Spiritual Growth

Based on the literature review that informed Chapter 2, I anticipated some level of spiritual growth on the part of the participants. Regarding the seven SFE, I also hoped participants would encounter what was defined in Chapter 1 as *individual growth* (see p. 13). The findings stated in Chapter 4 support that, at the very least, the participants perceived that they were genuinely engaged with each of the SFE.

Regarding a participant's "understanding of truth," 89 percent expressed that over the course of the study, they had experienced "life changing" truths. In Chapter 2, I referenced many of the great Christian preachers and thinkers of our time as I stated that for the purpose of this study, the Bible would be considered the authoritative source of truth. The participants who noted in both questionnaire responses and reflection statements that "the Bible has become alive for me" seemed to speak for many of the participants for whom the Bible had moved from being an irrelevant religious document to the living Word of God. Stetzer was correct when he said that the Bible was not just given to provide information but to ultimately lead to transformation (269). I found when the source of truth was definitive, the Bible, and the definition of truth was no longer relative, participants became more engaged. In contrast to the fear of many Christians, standing boldly on the truths of the Bible does not come across as narrow-minded. Rather, when passionately communicated in love, people rise up and pay attention. People are looking for some definitive sign post pointing to real life.

The second aspect of individual spiritual growth was an honest recognition of one's level of desire to grow in a relationship with God. Said succinctly, people (as well as churches) will begin to turn to God when they become desperate for God. Too often in the church we fall prey to the trap McNeal described when he stated the focus of the church is often aiming at the head and consequently missing the heart. He went on to say we should not be surprised that there was no passion, no hunger in the body of Christ (70).

The irony is that as the church aims for the head—tending to overemphasize information transmission, the unspoken hope is that passion and hunger will miraculously

occur. Though the truth of the grace of God, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8), does illicit a desire to experience grace, over the course of the study, I found the more participants acquired a genuine desire to grow spiritually, the more they seemed to be engaged and open to the truth of what God wanted to do in their lives. I also noted the more freedom participants felt to discuss their level of desire—or lack thereof—the more they were willing to deal with the aspects and truths of the Christian faith that tended to hamper their spiritual growth.

The good news was eighty percent of those who participated in the study shared that their level of desire for growing in their relationship with God increased over the course of the study. A hint of the increased spiritual hunger was the 49 percent of participants who referenced prayer as one of the steps they needed to take in order to move toward genuine transformation. As Tozer pointed out, prayer is the natural result of those who are desperate to see something other than what they can bring about on their own; to see God involved in life (70).

The third SFE was an appreciation for and a willingness to make the necessary sacrifices—costs—toward a growing relationship with God. Though not as high a percentage as truth or hunger, 67 percent of the participants noted that because of the SFE study, they perceived a greater appreciation and understanding of the sacrifices inherent in the truths of the gospel. The importance of the willingness to carry one’s cross is clearly communicated in Jesus’ statement, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it” (Luke 9:23-24). McManus was right

when he declared the center of God's will is one of the most dangerous places in the world (*Unstoppable Force* 32).

Despite the 67 percent who perceived an increase in their understanding of the costs of genuine transformation, participants noted a somewhat lower response to the question as to whether they had actually responded obediently despite the costs. The number declined from 67 percent who appreciated the presence of sacrifice—of a cross to bear—to just over half (51 percent) who admitted to being willing to actually bear the cross. A possible explanation of this discrepancy was the general consensus on the part of the participants (acquired via small group discussion and open-ended responses) that the costs outweighed the promises of the gospel; even though 84 percent of participants identified an increased perception of the promises. Not surprisingly the continual struggle to grasp the promises of the truth as compared to the inevitable costs of discipleship became an ongoing focal point of discussion and deliberation in most of the small groups. As one participant said on the questionnaire, “I want to want God. But I don't want to pay the price of changing the way I am.”

The remark, “I want to want God,” accounts for the 80 percent perceived increase in desire. Eight out of ten participants wanted to want God more. The added caveat, “But I don't want to pay the price,” accounts for the dismal 29 percent of participants who were unwilling to take the necessary steps to make themselves available for the Spirit to bring about genuine transformation. Participants seemed to have some difficulty recognizing the need for taking a step. Forty-two of those who participated in the study (93 percent) acknowledged they had become more aware of the need to take concrete steps toward transformation. Only 29 percent admitted to regularly taking those steps.

The disconnect between the awareness of the necessity of taking a step and the willingness to take the needed steps could have been the result of what McNeal referred to as decades of aiming at the head and not the heart (70). Church leaders find it much easier to keep Christianity in the realm of the theoretical instead of the arena of the actual. Though step was an integral part of the material used for the actual study, at least a month passed with the original small group before we added step to the SFE. In the course of our discussions, we realized in order to experience genuine spiritual growth and transformation we needed to go beyond waiting for God to give us inspiration and take a step toward the Spirit truly changing us through hard work.

Despite the few who admitted to not regularly taking the steps necessary toward transformation, 78 percent perceived some level of transformation in their lives. When I first noticed this discrepancy, I wrestled with how so few participants could fail to follow through with the necessary steps toward transformation, and still have 78 percent who perceived some level of transformation. My first inclination was to discount step as an indispensable element in transformation. However, the numerous indications that those who took step seriously experienced significantly deeper transformation could not be ignored. The data seemed contradictory; until I realized that wrestling with the other SFE was actually a step toward transformation. Being a part of a small group was in itself an intentional step toward transformation. The fact that participants took the time to read the curriculum was a step. When participants asked questions, they were taking steps. When they voiced their struggles and requested prayer to help them work through their issues, they were taking steps. All of these actions were steps that little by little could, and

evidently did, move participants into a position in their hearts where the Spirit was able to legitimately transform them.

However, another disparity arose between transformation and fruit. If 78 percent of participants perceived some degree of transformation, and if a natural outflow of transformation in the Spirit is the fruits of the Spirit, one could assume that at least 78 percent of the participants would note some visible change, some fruit, in their lives. Surprisingly, only 56 percent noted any type of “visible change” in their lives over the course of the study. One explanation could be that it is easier to claim to be transformed than to actually manifest the fruits of transformation. Another possibility could be that the questionnaire specifically asked participants if *others* had noted any visible change. Participants may not have felt comfortable conjecturing as to whether others had noticed a change in their lives or not, and were unwilling to ask.

Another explanation for the inconsistency between the higher percentage of perceived transformation and lower percentage of perceived visible fruit may have been the semantics of the questions regarding transformation. One of the transformation questions asked participants to note their perspective regarding the Likert scale statement, “I found the insights in this study helpful toward genuine transformation.” Though the wording in this question includes “transformation,” the possible operative word for participants may have been “insights.” Some participants may have read the question as asking what *information* one might have gleaned regarding transformation instead of what actual transformation one might have experienced. Another transformation-related question posed the Likert scale statement, “Since this study, I have experienced

transformation in my relationship with God.” Participants may have interpreted transformation as that having to do *only* with their relationship with God.

The questionnaire’s open-ended responses, as well as the reflection statements possessed a strong sense of excitement and celebration regarding a new or renewed relationship with God. Many participants stated the primary take-away from the SFE focus was that their original conception of God had changed from one of God as aloof and distant to a God who was approachable and personal. Hence, if the participants understood transformation as a renewed relationship with God—which is an integral aspect of transformation—then the 78 percent could have represented an inner transformation that had not as of yet revealed truths that would eventually lead to other-related transformations.

An additional possible explanation of the 78 percent who perceived some level of transformation and the lower 56 percent who perceived any corresponding fruit could be surmised by remarks like, “I have so far to go,” or “I’m excited about the journey.” The implication of these statements is the recognition of a journey ahead. As Paul said to the Philippians, and as was noted in Chapter 2, spiritual formation and ultimately transformation that manifests itself in fruit is a process. Many of the participants may have truly experienced a legitimate first step aspect of transformation in Christ, but like some journeys, they may already recognize the road is long. Some of the participants may have genuinely planted a significant seed in their Christian lives, but like any seed, it will take time to grow and bear fruit.

Whatever might be the reason for the percentage difference between transformation and fruit, after an intentional focus on the SFE, one participant

communicated the general finding of the study regarding participants' perceived life transformations, "Wow! What a ride it has been, never in my mind would I think as little as over a year ago could one's life change so much and to see The River come alive."

The Effect of an SFE Focus on the Perception of Church Growth

In Chapter 2, I suggested spiritual formation as the essence of a foundation for healthy church plants. My contention was that if core values were the primary agreed upon baseline for church plants, as that which informs the development and function of the structures and ministry of the church, then something needed to inform core values in order to keep them God focused and Holy Spirit empowered. I suggested that ongoing and intentional spiritual formation could be the emphasis which informed and formed a church's core values. Though a direct correlation between the seven SFE studied in this intervention and the growth and development of the church plant has not been statistically established, Chapter 4 findings tend to substantiate the possibility that an intentional focus on the SFE does have at least a perceived positive overall impact on the growth and development of the new church.

In Chapter 1, *church growth* was defined as, but not limited to, an increase in weekly Sunday worship services, professions of faith, baptisms, small groups created, acts of kindness, evangelical outreach, and personal testimonies regarding noticeable transformation. Though this study was not able to statistically prove or demonstrate a correlation between the SFE study and any positive statistics of the new church, a comparison of the first year statistics of The River with those of Ed Stetzer and Phillip Conner's national study of new church plants could offer an optimistic assumption. Stetzer and Conner's 10-year study states that out of two thousand churches from

multiple denominations, the average attendance at the one-year mark was 42 (7). By comparison, The River's average attendance at the one year mark was 170, a 304 percent increase over the national average. Surprisingly, Stetzer's research did not include any other spiritual formation or ministry involvement statistics such as the percentage of those involved in small groups, the number of small groups, the number of small group leaders, outreach efforts, or acts of kindness. The United Methodist Church does not possess statistics pertaining to new churches due to the fact that the more detailed statistical records are requested only after a church charts and becomes a self-sustaining independent church.

The temptation for church plant pastors, as well as those involved in the early stages of the launch, is to focus solely on numbers attending or people filling the pews. As my journal notes, one launch team member bluntly stated, "Our primary task is to get more butts in the pews. If people don't come, we'll never have a church." Sadly, that mentality was prevalent among the majority of persons who initially signed up to help launch The River. As was noted in Chapter 1, The River is a church plant out of Grace Fellowship United Methodist Church in Katy, Texas. At the time of the launch of The River, Grace Fellowship averaged 2,600 people on Sunday morning. According to Grace's records, 663 people attended their initial launch Sunday twelve years ago. Even more impressive was the fact that the average attendance at Grace never dropped below three hundred except for two Sundays during their first summer. Those figures are almost unheard of in church planting circles. However, since the launch team was made up entirely of Grace Fellowship members, most of them desired and expected The River to duplicate the initial attendance of its mother church.

To the disappointment of many of the launch team, in its first year, The River never experienced the attendance numbers of Grace. On The River's initial launch date, 220 people attended worship. The average attendance during the summer months was barely over one-hundred. As noted earlier, by the end of its first year, The River averaged 170 on Sunday morning. Because of the slightly skewed perspective of the majority of the launch team and initial leadership, there was constant discussion regarding a perceived necessity to focus on "butts in the pews" and what I had established as the foundation for the body of Christ known as The River. I was determined that The River would be based on a foundation of spiritual formation that focused on the constant surrender of the lives of the participants to the movement of the Holy Spirit. As I stated numerous times in leadership meetings, small groups, and in my journal, "If we want to see God grow The River, then we need to stay surrendered to God. If we remain available vessels, then the numeric growth was up to God. Our focus should be spiritual growth and leave the bean counting up to Him." Because of that stand, and in part because of the intentional focus on the SFE, some of the more significant statements of perceived spiritual growth and development were made in the reflection statements of some of the very same leaders who in the early months of the church were driven by the sole focus of marketing the church in order to foster larger attendance.

Further Insights

Further insights dealt with the importance of an atmosphere of acceptance and honesty, the apparent progressive transformation that dealt with self, others, and God, the perception on the part of participants that genuine transformation entailed significant

investment, and the evident necessity of taking some concrete step toward transformation.

The Importance of an Accepting and Honest Atmosphere

In addition to the anticipated perceived growth of the church and its participating individuals, the findings also suggested that a key causational element of the perceived success of the SFE study was the atmosphere of acceptance and vulnerability established in the small groups as well as throughout the church. I described this atmosphere in Chapter 2 and likened it to a sinner's anonymous based on the culture of vulnerability found in Alcoholics Anonymous. The study supported MacDonald's belief that true revival would happen in the church when "sanctuaries become places where a man or woman, having failed God and the community of Christ-followers, can open his or her heart and say in blunt language, 'I have sinned'" (247). Two reflection statements summarized the general consensus of the dramatic effect of a sinner's anonymous atmosphere on The River as a place for genuine spiritual formation:

The Truth-to-Fruit model is a way to be genuinely yourself. God knows who we are and He knows our heart. We don't have to be fake or false or put on an act. By having this model as a basic teaching of The River in its infant stages, I think it has laid a strong foundation for the congregation to build their lives on honesty and genuineness.

I think the model has had a big influence on the congregation and helped us to be ourselves. Once we can take off the masks and be ourselves and let other people know that we are not perfect, I think people will see that God is real and will come to The River to meet him.

Shoemaker, the spiritual director of Alcoholics Anonymous, stated that people do not make progress in their lives unless they acknowledge their areas of need.

Although my initial instinct was that an authentic encounter with any of the SFE would only be possible in an atmosphere of acceptance and vulnerability, I was not

prepared to witness the passion and enthusiasm with which many of the small group participants embraced the sinner's anonymous culture. Since an atmosphere of vulnerability was not originally the aspect of the project I was studying, rather a suggested catalyst for the study, I have been unable to specifically note whether the small group acceptance of that atmosphere influenced the Sunday morning worship, or my intentional illustration of vulnerability and honesty from the pulpit influenced the small groups. It was probably a combination of both. Whatever the case, a vulnerable and honest atmosphere benefited a genuine engagement of each SFE.

As an example of the beneficial nature of a vulnerable atmosphere, both the questionnaire and the debriefings of the small group leaders revealed the presence of some pride and arrogance among the participants. Over the course of the study, the small group leaders discovered there was a legitimate reason the writer of Proverbs said, "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (16:18). The leaders noted that the small groups that struggled the most were the ones with members who were too prideful to acknowledge they had anything new to learn, any new truths to encounter. The leaders agreed that those who were unreceptive to new truths due to their pride made very little visible progress in their spiritual formation. For even a perception of spiritual growth, participants needed to set aside their spiritual pride and be vulnerable enough to admit they had yet to discover more life-changing truths.

Sadly, the prideful mind-set of some had a perceived and periodic negative effect on the group as a whole. During the debriefings, a number of the group leaders referenced one or two persons who often made the vulnerable seekers in the groups too uncomfortable or embarrassed to ask the questions they needed to ask. Only when the

leaders addressed the issues of pride, arrogance, and closed-mindedness were the groups able to eventually move forward. McManus notes, “Only the teachable heart will embrace whatever truth is needed for the moment. If we are not teachable, there will be no transformation. If we are unwilling to listen, we are incapable of learning” (*Stand against the Wind* 31).

The groups needed an atmosphere of vulnerable humility not only to truly encounter truth, but the SFE of cost as well. In order to work past one’s fear of sacrifice, one benefits from having a safe setting in which to voice those fears and hopefully receive understanding and support regarding them. Few persons are likely to share their concerns regarding childish or selfish fears if the response is apt to be condemnation or rejection.

The same is true for the SFE of hunger. If an aspect of genuine transformation is an honest appraisal of the level of one’s desire to grow deeper in that relationship, then one needs to have a setting in which one can candidly say—without fear of judgment or recrimination, “I really don’t want it right now.”

Step necessitated an atmosphere of vulnerability in that “I wanted to take a step, but I never got around to it,” could only be shared when the masks of “having it all together” were removed by the majority of those taking part in the small group. Even the SFE of promise required an environment of acceptance and understanding. If one’s level of desire for authentic transformation was contingent in part on a balance of cost and promise, then one needed the freedom to honestly admit one’s skepticism regarding the validity of some of the gospel promises.

The level of honesty and vulnerability in the various small groups may have also played a part in the discrepancy between the 78 percent of participants who perceived some degree of transformation and the 56 percent who perceived a manifestation of that transformation in their lives. A possibility might have been that the more vulnerable groups challenged members who claimed to be experiencing transformation but had little visible evidence to substantiate that change. Hence, when those participants answered the questionnaire, they referenced perceived transformation (78 percent), but the group's challenge forced them to rethink their willingness to note visible proof of that transformation.

Ultimately, the groups and persons who were a part of the more vulnerable and honest groups referenced deeper and more genuine transformation than those who were not. This supports the contention from Chapter 2 that without a culture that is a safe haven of vulnerability for the lost, the hurting, and the sin-filled, they will look elsewhere for comfort and hope. As Scazzero states, "In emotionally healthy churches, people live and lead out of brokenness and vulnerability" (110).

Progressive Transformation

Participants expressed an unexpected emphasis throughout the questionnaire responses regarding relationships with others. Approximately fifty-six percent of the truths about which the Spirit was speaking to participants dealt with relationships with others. Likewise, 58 percent of participants noted that some of the more difficult costs toward genuine transformation were issues that dealt with relationships. Not surprisingly, 73 percent of the transformations specifically noted in the open-ended section of transformation referenced participants' relationships. My journal entries, and specifically

the prayer requests I noted from our small group meetings, also substantiated the level of interest participants had in dealing with their interpersonal relationships. Frequently the prayer requests dealt with marriage issues, relationships with persons at work, forgiveness of those who had wronged them, their own need to be forgiven by others, and ultimately, the call to go at least to one's circle of acquaintances and share what God had done and was doing in their lives.

What made the degree of other-related truths, costs, and transformations so unexpected was the fact relational truths were by no means the central focus of the SFE study curriculum. Two issues may have been at play regarding the level of other-centered responses despite the absence of other-centered foci in the curriculum. First, as evidenced by the open-ended responses, a number of participants evidently were struggling with serious interpersonal relationship issues. Second, the SFE curriculum did contain a thread stating that a deepening relationship with God in Christ inevitably leads to an inclination to reach out to others. When Jesus told the disciples to wait for the filling of the Holy Spirit, he did not tell them the result of that filling would be their personal comfort or fulfilled lives. Rather, he said, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). Malphurs was correct when he stated that Jesus' call to those who would follow him was not to be a "holy huddle or an inward-focused family that cares for its own and no one else" (*Advanced Strategic Planning* 174). Rather, Jesus' call was to be a group focused outwardly on the lost and hurting; those who have not yet heard the good news of release for the captives. Participants' seemingly intuitive focus on others may be the natural result of a Christ-centered focus ultimately leading to an instinctive and passionate drive to reach others. McManus says,

“No measure of Christian maturity exists in our context without an evangelistic lifestyle” (*Unstoppable Force* 223).

Another related finding over the course of the study was that though participants did focus on truths and areas of transformation related to relationships with others, there was also an instinctive realization that in order to be used effectively by God to authentically move toward other-related transformations, the participants had to contend with their own issues related to a relationship with God. In Chapter 2, I quoted Willard as one person who alluded to the undergirding progressive movement of incremental transformation leading to effective outreach. Willard points out that even if a church’s primary emphasis is loving its neighbors, if it has not sought to love God first and follow his design and desire for the church, the people will not be able to truly love as God alone could equip them to love (26).

The emphasis of self, God, and others as a progressive thread was evidenced by the fact that 86 percent of the SFE, not including hunger, could be categorized into either self, God, or others. Issues dealing with self, God, and others made up 82 percent of the life-changing truths, 82 percent of the costs, 51 percent of the hindrances to desire, with time being the issue that replaced God in the top three, 92 percent of promise, 88 percent of step, 84 percent of transformation, and 86 percent of fruit.

In the open-ended responses regarding promise, the highest percentage of the promises relevant to particular truths of a relationship with God directly related to promises dealing with God. The dramatic percentage of God-related promises may be indicative of the fact participants were beginning to glean the central focus of the SFE; that genuine transformation does not occur when a person brings about transformation on

one's own power. Rather, fruit is the result of genuine transformation by the Holy Spirit. One's hope is not to try harder, but to surrender more fully. The only real promise of transformation is that God will come through, and as one participant stated, "We take a step, God will meet us and then equip us."

Genuine Transformation Entails Significant Investment

The significant investments toward Transformation were time, connection, and passion.

Time. An unanticipated finding was the degree to which participants referenced time or distractions as one of their primary hindrances toward an increased desire to grow in their relationship with God. Each of the small group leaders shared that time, or the lack thereof, was a major discussion topic throughout the course of the study. As was noted in Chapter 4, 49 percent of the participants specifically referenced time or life distractions as primary hindrances in their lives.

On the surface, one would not think time would have any impact on the level of someone's desire or lack of desire to grow deeper in a relationship with God. One can want to watch more TV, yet not have enough time to do it. A person could want to study a foreign language yet be distracted from actually following through with the necessary study because of life's distractions.

Perhaps the references to time were instinctive recognitions of Burke's contention that God is constantly struggling to get our attention long enough to help us face the important issues of faith, but "the worries, the busyness, and the noise of life distract us" (109). Maybe the numerous notations of time in the questionnaires were the frustrated cries of persons in possession of overloaded Blackberrys and PalmPilots. Stetzer says that

one of the reasons churches so frequently “jettison intentional disciple making or spiritual formation” is because families were already over-scheduled and ridiculously busy (24). One of the possible significant road-blocks to genuine transformation is that our society is so busy focusing on the urgent things of life that we do not have enough time to deal with the important things of life. This misguided focus might very well be the reason why God said through the Psalmist, “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10).

Another possible explanation of the number of references to time and distractions may have had more to do with participants’ impatience than with their busy schedules. Many have suggested over the years that in America we want everything immediately. In other words, we want everything and we want it yesterday. However, as was implied in the previous finding regarding the incremental and progressive aspects of spiritual formation, the Christian life is a process. The Christian life is a journey that takes time and patience. Though persons may make great strides in one’s Christian walk, authentic transformation is not instantaneous. Paul said, “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Phil. 3:12). The incremental transformation of a person is not a conversion to the entirety of the truth of the gospel of Christ. One might be converted to the truth of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, or one’s need to experience the forgiveness for one’s sins through the sacrifice of Christ. Yet even those life altering truths are only the tip of an immense iceberg of gospel truths waiting below the surface to be discovered. Jesus alluded to this incremental process when he said, “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth” (John 16:12-13). Perhaps the SFE provided a avenue for participants to

voice their honest heart-felt cry, “I don’t have time for this,” in response to the seemingly overwhelming, yet-to-be-discovered truths of the gospel.

Connection. Though participants frequently referenced time and distractions as hindrances to increased desire for God, they may have been simply stating symptoms of the problem and not the cause. Time may have been the most expedient way to articulate the actual issue, an anxiety of the heart, rather than just a symptom, a ridiculously busy schedule. The participants who referenced “over-extended” or “overwhelmed” were possibly closer to articulating the actual struggle. Perhaps the issue for some participants was not only the recognition of the magnitude of the call of Christ, but the overwhelming feeling that the call of Christ was only one call among a myriad of other voices vying for their time. The participants’ instinctive reaction was that they could be spread only so thin. One participant expressed that sentiment when he said, “If I give of myself to God, when will it stop?” The fact that some participants noted “Laziness” as a hindrance toward genuine transformation could also support the inference that desiring a growing relationship with God was perceived by some as more than they believed they could handle.

The perception of being overwhelmed may have had as much to do with relational issues as it did with time and feeling overwhelmed. M. Scott Boren states that each person has only so many “connectors” (70). Though Boren was speaking about a person’s ability to connect deeply and intimately with a finite number of other persons, one can postulate that if our connectors are limited, and if someone hopes to increase one’s connection with God, then the obvious implication is that something has to be removed. Some connector has to be freed in order to make room for a deeper connection with

something or someone else. The something that has to go could be time, it could be our own specific escape mechanisms (hence the reason a number of participants mentioned “TV” as a stumbling block), or it could be our relationships with others. Simply put, growing deeper in a relationship with God takes time and energy away from other things, connections, and priorities in one’s life. Jesus said, “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:13, NAS). Though money and possessions are definitely idols in our current day, perhaps we need to expand the pantheon of other gods that hinder our full devotion to Christ.

Heart or passion. Perhaps time, distractions, and feelings of being overwhelmed were simple references to the busyness of our society or our inability to disconnect with some things in order to connect with God. However, “laziness” and “overwhelmed” might have been pointing to something deeper, more heart-wrenching, and more difficult to articulate. In essence, a possible interpretation of the prevalent consensus of being overwhelmed or over-extended may have been simply articulating a core issue that genuine transformation is not an easy endeavor. Participants noted transformation as the most difficult of the SFE to ultimately experience. One of the possible reasons for that choice may have been the inherent challenge and change involved in authentic transformation. Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt. 5:6). Though it sounds poetic, and even romantic to some, hungering and thirsting are both hard and challenging. Tozer said one of the real problems with dynamic spiritual growth is people just do not want it badly enough (79).

In Chapter 2, I noted the challenge of the Christian walk:

The greatest sacrifice inherent in the Christian walk is the call to die to oneself and to set aside one's own agenda, ego, and desires in order to be filled with God's agenda and desires. To die to self is being willing to go through the necessary refining fires in order to have the dross, sin, and cancers of one's soul burned away until one's life reflects the Master's.
(66)

I followed that statement by referencing Glenn McDonald's imagery that we belong most fully to Christ when we have given him permission to "crush those parts of us that we have tried the hardest to keep under wraps." Perhaps participants' feelings of being overwhelmed entailed not only the time they sensed it would take to work through the issues with which they needed to struggle, but also the inherent personal investment and sacrifice in being crushed.

Actively Taking Steps toward Transformation

When I first started analyzing the responses to the questionnaire, specifically the various items referenced in the open-ended section regarding step, I assumed the large number of steps referencing Bible reading and prayer were little more than surface responses to a question like, "What do good Christians do?" The more I analyzed the responses to step, the more I realized that many of the participants had indeed grasped the significance and the specificity of the step aspect of the SFE. A good example is the person who wrote, "Putting myself in situations where I can be used." The primary focus of the step aspect of the SFE was not to pretend to be transformed until one becomes transformed. Rather, in the case of loving one's enemy, a step would be putting oneself in situations where one would be relying on God to give the love one needed in order to love an enemy. When we step out beyond our own abilities and are forced to rely on the Holy Spirit to equip and work through us, we have set the stage for a significant transformation of the heart.

However, what makes taking the steps outside of one's own abilities so daunting is the implied vulnerability. One participant stated, "Step is difficult because it is really difficult to know God will take care of you." Step is rarely easy and has few guarantees. If the Holy Spirit speaks to someone about the truth of forgiving someone who had harmed them, a significant step would be to trust that God would take care of them as they vulnerably reached out to the person who had already harmed them. Step could be sharing with an accountability partner a heartfelt prayer request, risking the embarrassment of unanswered prayers, dashed hopes, or broken confidences. The participant who said, "Being forgiving/being non-critical," was taking the step to move beyond her defense mechanism of judgmentalism in order to make herself vulnerable to others. The person who stated he wanted to, "Tell someone about the good works in my life," was taking a first step to move his faith beyond a merely personal experience, and begin a dialogue with others about that which was important to him.

Over the course of not only the study itself, but the initial formation of the study, I discovered the essential nature of step. I noted again how right Bonhoeffer was when he writes, "The road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus. Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air" (63). McManus states that God's promise to Joshua was not that God would simply hand the land over without any effort. Rather, the promise was "God would go *with* [original emphasis] them, but He would not go *for* [original emphasis] them" (*Uprising* 94). McManus goes on to say, "Transformation is both the miracle of God and the stewardship of man" (180).

A serendipitous discovery in the course of the study was the impact the SFE of step had on the participants' overall individual spiritual formation scores. Though I could

not prove a direct correlation, those who took seriously the step aspect of the questionnaire tended to have higher overall scores, as well as more pronounced and specific references to transformation, than those who did not.

The step aspect of the SFE not only provided insight into an important element in authentic spiritual formation, but it may have also shed some light on participants' sense of a lack of time, or their feelings of being overwhelmed. Surprisingly, I did not anticipate the positive effect of step on participant's perception of being overwhelmed. The participants who not only listed but also followed through with the step aspect of the SFE were the ones who felt less overwhelmed than those who did not follow through. Possibly those who followed through with their steps experienced a genuine touch of the Holy Spirit, which in turn, empowered and encouraged them to continue toward deeper spiritual formation. Those who were unwilling to follow through often did not follow through because they wrongly assumed both the work of step and transformation was dependent on them. They apparently had difficulty grasping that step was not making transformation happen on their own power, but, as quoted earlier, putting oneself in situations where one would become available for God to work in and through them. Kinlaw is correct; following Christ is hard work (November 7). Following Christ is more than just an intellectual exercise, but also includes a surrender of the will. Those who truly desire to grow spiritually have to realize no magic wand exists for the Christian faith; there are no shortcuts. We have to "roll up [our] spiritual sleeves and tackle the task [God] has assigned.... We certainly have divine help, but God will never do for us what is our responsibility to do" (November 7), and that is, take a step.

Limitations and Weaknesses of the Study

The abbreviated time frame for conducting the study may be one of the more significant limitations to the study. The length of the study was not limiting as far as gleaning some insights as to whether the intentional focus on the SFE had a positive or negative perceived impact on the participants and the growth of the church plant. Rather the fourteen month time frame limited the authoritativeness of the findings as a viable *and* long-term spiritual formation model and emphasis. Realistically, a variety of factors other than the SFE focus may have attributed to the positive nature of the one year statistics for the church plant. To substantiate any viable claim that a continued focus on spiritual formation via the SFE would, in the long term, positively influence a church plant, the intervention would need to be extended three to five years.

Another weakness in the study is that there was no way to control the quality of each small group. Though I mentored and trained the initial small group leaders, only the periodic leader debriefings provided follow-up regarding the degree of vulnerability being allowed in the group and the intentionality of the leaders to keep the group focused on the SFE. With such a small number of participants (forty-five returned questionnaires), one badly managed or led group could have had a negative effect on the overall perceived results.

One of the questionnaire's Likert questions referenced a participant's opinion as to whether others had noticed a change in his or her life. I chose to include the question in order to ascertain a participant's perception of the degree any possible transformation may have actually manifested itself. In order to provide a more objective and "full"

picture of a participant's actual transformation, I should have given a separate questionnaire to at least two associates of each participant.

Another possible weakness in the study may have been the large number of participants who had been Christians eleven years or more (69 percent), and who were from a Methodist background (87 percent). Though the study focused on a specific United Methodist church plant, in order to make the study more generalizable, I should have sought a broader spectrum of church experience, length of Christian walk, and denominational background.

One glaring weakness in the questionnaire is the absence of any reference to the Holy Spirit. Chapter 2 dealt extensively with the necessity of the Holy Spirit regarding transformation. Though the curriculum used to communicate the seven SFE frequently emphasized the Holy Spirit, and though persons who attended the church plant were exposed to sermons that taught the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, very little was provided in the questionnaire that measured a participant's perceived understanding or experience of the Holy Spirit.

The most pronounced weakness in the study is the lack of statistical validity in regard to the questionnaire and the Likert scale data. I could have gleaned much more information and had utilized the Likert material as more substantive data had I been able to provide a pretest to the SFE study participants. Had there been a pre-test to accompany the post-study questionnaire, I would have been able to run a Chronback's Alpha. As was probably noted through portions of Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, I did reference some of the statistical data, but only as it informs the qualitative responses of the participants.

Recommendations

Due to the significant number of participants who referenced time, distractions, and being overwhelmed, further study is warranted to discover what part stress might play in inhibiting a positive experience of the SFE specifically, and of spiritual formation in general. A focus on the SFE demands a great deal of honest and clear introspection, and those under stress are less able to process information than those who are not.

The generally unspoken inference of the study was as members of a church plant grew spiritually, the core values of the church would remain Christ centered and biblically based. Those Christ-centered core values would in turn inform and form a healthy, dynamic, and probably growing body. However, core values cannot shake a hand when a visitor walks through the door. Core values do not count money, or pray with someone at the altar. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, the body of Christ is build up “as each part does its work” (Eph. 4:16). A future study could be the examination of the impact of a continued focus on the SFE on the number of persons beginning or increasing the level of their involvement in the volunteer ministries of the church. Though the current study asked for a participant’s level of involvement at the time they completed the questionnaire, as stated earlier, there was no pretest administered so as to be able to measure any increase in the level of involvement. Had there been a pretest, there would have been at least one more significant piece of data to substantiate any connection between the SFE focus and the attendance and ministry statistics of The River at the one year mark.

Regarding a step-related recommendation I would strongly suggest that preachers and small group leaders emphasize some level of action plan at the close of a worship

service or small group. If we are serious about persons experiencing transformation in Christ, we need to be more intentional about offering some type of take away step.

Another recommendation would be further study of the effect of the sinner's anonymous atmosphere in the church and small groups on authentic spiritual formation. Insights into small group dynamics would be informative if there were a study on what effect the level of intimacy in a small group had on each person's ability to articulate and process the various elements of the seven SFE. Though there were numerous positive references regarding the perceived role the sinner's anonymous environment played in the impact of the SFE study, no attempt was made to either control the environment of each group or measure the effect.

A related recommendation for further study would be an examination of the impact of a small group on one's own introspective honesty. This study would not necessarily be a study of small group health, per se, rather the ability of individuals who do not take part in a small group to honestly assess their spiritual growth—or lack thereof—without the challenge and accountability of a small group.

A sixth recommendation would be to do further research and analysis on how persons who were new in the faith and those who had been Christians for a longer time responded to the specifics of the various elements of the SFE. The questionnaire contained a different open-ended question for each SFE. Christian leaders could glean a great deal from an analysis of the truths referenced by new Christians as opposed to those referenced by persons who had been Christians for years. One can assume that the issues and struggles of the seeker are different from those of a seasoned believer. Shooting a bullet aimed at a particular target would be much more effective and efficient than using

the shotgun approach to ministry and preaching. Though in the study the number of years participants had been Christian were varied, the group was highly skewed toward persons who had been Christian for eleven years or more.

A seventh recommendation would be to specifically study the hunger and desire aspect of the SFE. One of the weaknesses in the questionnaire was that I never posed the question, “Has your desire increased or decreased over the course of the study?” or “How has your level of desire impacted your transformation?” Although a version of the second question was alluded to with the question, “I now desire to know God more than I did prior to this study” (Question 12), the questionnaire supplied no question that specifically asked the participant to offer his perspective on the impact of his desire on the degree of his transformation.

Due to the glaring absence of data regarding the various aspects of new church plants—aspects other than worship attendance, baptisms, and giving—another recommendation would be that more quantifiable data from new churches be acquired in order to be able to assess the overall impact of studies such as this one on the health and growth of a new church. For example, a helpful research project could be based on the questions: What is a healthy percentage level of adult small group involvement? Do the current statistics of worship attendance reflect adult attendance or of everyone in attendance, regardless of age? What is the average number of leaders or involved persons in a new church? If statistics are not available until a church charts—as is the case with the United Methodist Church, then new churches will be unaware of possible growth points and unable to make necessary course corrections in a timely manner.

The final recommendation would be to extend the study well beyond the first anniversary mark of the church. The writer of Hebrews encourages his readers to run the race of faith with perseverance (Heb. 12:1). Paul admonishes the church at Corinth to finish the race of faith by being disciplined in the long race (1 Cor. 9:24-27). Both were alluding to the fact that the Christian walk, as well as growing a new body of Christ, is not a sprint but a marathon. How one endures the long, drawn-out middle of the race is as important, if not more so, than how one starts. Any suggested methodology, program, or focus for the body of Christ gains an immeasurable amount of credibility when the methodology, program, or focus is shown to be effective over a long period of time. A valid and needed aspect of this study would be to see how The River is faring at the three and five year mark of its existence.

Personal Reflections

This study is the culmination of twenty-four years of ministry and the ongoing search for answers as to why the church of Jesus Christ struggles so mightily with reaching the world with the good news of Christ. My first twenty years of ministry were spent as a “turn-around” minister. My responsibility was to go into existing churches and try to turn around the years of decline and dysfunction. The churches that were able to eventually turn away from their decline and begin to grow both spiritually and numerically had one attribute in common: they were desperate. It was their desperation that made them look beyond the newest cure-all for churches, and seek God. I was able to witness first hand God’s words through Jeremiah, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13).

Throughout my ministry, my ultimate goal has been to try to find a way to effectively and intentionally help the body of Christ perpetually seek God with all their heart; to implement spiritual formation that would form the church, propel it toward healthy ministry, and short-circuit the natural tendency of churches to eventually focus inward. Dynamic and proven structures, leadership principles, and methodologies have certainly played and will play a part in furthering the kingdom of God on the earth. However, over the course of this dissertation work, I recognized once again the desperate need of churches to be founded on the *truths* of the Word of God, understand the *cost* of full surrender, acknowledge the *promises* of faithfulness, be *hungry* enough to take the *steps* necessary to make the church corporately and the people individually available for the Holy Spirit to genuinely *transform* them into a body of Christ that manifests the *fruit* of Christ to a lost and hurting world.

My hope is pastors of churches, whether new, growing, plateaued, or declining, would acquire a fire to find some way, any way, for their congregations to experience a radical transformation in Christ. The hard reality is that unless the people of God are intentionally making themselves available to be transformed by the Spirit of God, Christians will never be able to accomplish the commission of God, “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). Or, as my father used to say, “You can’t give away what you ain’t got any more than you can come back from where you ain’t been.” My hope is that this study and focus on the SFE may be one more tool in the arsenal of the called leader to help the body of Christ fulfill its divine calling.

APPENDIX A

Spiritual Formation Questionnaire

Test Number: _____

Introduction and Instructions: Thank you for taking part in this questionnaire. Your participation is greatly appreciated. Please answer as honestly as possible. Typically your first response is the most accurate. *Please respond to the following questions based on your experience and response to the study of “A Walk On The Mountain.”*

I. The Truths of the good news of Jesus Christ

1. Over the course of this study, I have encountered a number of life challenging truths.
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
2. I am not growing in my understanding of God
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
3. The Bible is becoming alive for me
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
4. I have been impacted most by the following three truths: 1) _____
 2) _____ 3) _____

II. A consideration of the Cost often implicit in experiencing the truths of God

5. I have been challenged to honestly examine the costs of a relationship with God?
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
6. Prior to this study, I had considered the cost of a relationship with God.
☐ Very frequently ☐ Frequently ☐ Periodically ☐ Almost never ☐ Never
7. The reality of the cost of discipleship...:
☐ Strongly encourages ☐ Encourages ☐ Has no effect ☐ Causes concern ☐ Strong concern
8. During or since the study how often have you found yourself acknowledging the cost of God's truth?
☐ Very frequently ☐ Frequently ☐ Periodically ☐ Almost never ☐ Never
9. During or since the study how often have you followed God's leading despite the costs?
☐ Very frequently ☐ Frequently ☐ Periodically ☐ Almost never ☐ Never
10. I have been challenged most by the following three costs: 1) _____
 2) _____ 3) _____

III. An examination of one's *hunger* for God in one's life

11. I have been encouraged to examine my level of *desire* for a deeper encounter with God and realization of His truth in my life?
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
12. I now desire to know God more than I did prior to this study.
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
13. There are things or persons other than God that I lean on for strength.
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
14. I have recognized the following as the top three things in my life that may hinder my hunger for God: 1) _____ 2) _____
 3) _____

IV. An examination of the promise of God's truth becoming a reality in one's life

15. Because of this study, I understand that every truth of God is accompanied by a promise.
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
16. I recognize that my experiencing God's promises is contingent on my ongoing surrender to God.
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
17. I have been encouraged to continue to grow in my relationship with God because of the following three promises I gleaned from this study: 1) _____
 2) _____ 3) _____

V. An examination of possible steps toward experiencing God's truth in one's life.

18. Over the course of the study, I have recognized that I can take an active part in God's transformation in my life.
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
19. Weekly I found myself writing down the steps I needed to take in order to encounter God's truth.
☐ Very frequently ☐ Frequently ☐ Periodically ☐ Almost never ☐ Never
20. Weekly I found myself following through with the steps that I had written.
☐ Very frequently ☐ Frequently ☐ Periodically ☐ Almost never ☐ Never
21. The following are the top three steps I have committed to in order to continue growing in my relationship with God: 1) _____ 2) _____
 3) _____

VI. A recognition of the *Transformation* taking place in one's life

22. Since this study, I have experienced transformation in my relationship with God.
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
23. I found the insights in this study helpful toward genuine transformation.
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
24. Since taking part in this study, my heart has been transformed in the following ways/areas:
 1) _____ 2) _____
 3) _____

VII. An acknowledgement of the *Fruit* consequent to transformation

25. Since taking part in the study, I have a better grasp of the difference between fruit and heart transformation.
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
26. I understand that difference as:

27. Others would say that my life has visible changed over the course of the study.
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
28. Since taking part in this study, the following are the top three fruits that are now being manifested in my life: 1) _____ 2) _____
 3) _____

VII. General

29. Over the course of this study, my understanding of the Christian life has:
☐ Greatly improved ☐ Improved ☐ Neutral ☐ Been confused ☐ Significantly confused
30. Over the course of this study, my participation in the ministry of the body of Christ, the church, has:
☐ Greatly increased ☐ Increased ☐ Neutral ☐ Lessened ☐ Significantly lessened
31. Which of the seven Spiritual Formation Emphasis did you have the most difficulty understanding?
 (circle one) Truth Cost Hunger Promise Step Transformation Fruit
32. Which of the seven Spiritual Formation Emphasis did you have the most difficulty experiencing?
 (circle one) Truth Cost Hunger Promise Step Transformation Fruit
33. Why did you answer as you did in question 32?

34. I took part in a small group discussion of "A Walk on The Mountain." ☐ Yes ☐ No

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. All of your responses will be kept in complete confidentiality. Please take a moment and complete the "Life Description" portion of this questionnaire. This second section will help us know more about those who took part in the study.

IX. Life Description

*(Please respond to the following questions based on your life situation **over the past three months**)*

35. My job has been
☐ Very enjoyable ☐ Enjoyable ☐ Neutral ☐ Stressful ☐ Very stressful
36. My personal life has been
☐ Very enjoyable ☐ Enjoyable ☐ Neutral ☐ Stressful ☐ Very stressful
37. My health has been
☐ Very good ☐ Good ☐ Neutral ☐ Bad ☐ Very bad
38. I have taken part in other Christ-centered events other than those in connection with this study.
☐ Very frequently ☐ Frequently ☐ Periodically ☐ Almost never ☐ Never
39. I expose myself to Christian material (books, music, articles, programming)
☐ Very frequently ☐ Frequently ☐ Periodically ☐ Almost never ☐ Never

X. Demographic Information

40. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female
41. Age range:
☐ 18-24 years ☐ 25-31 years ☐ 31-38 years ☐ 39-46 years
☐ 47-54 years ☐ 55-65 years ☐ 65 over?
42. Marital Status:
☐ Married ☐ Separated ☐ Widowed ☐ Previously married ☐ Never married
43. Highest level of education completed:
☐ Some high school ☐ High school ☐ Some college
☐ College graduate ☐ Masters work or degree
☐ Other _____
44. What is your religious affiliation?
☐ Methodist ☐ Presbyterian ☐ Catholic ☐ Baptist ☐ Episcopalian
☐ Atheist (Don't believe in God) ☐ Agnostic (Don't know if believe)
☐ Other _____
45. What has been your recent level of church attendance?
☐ Weekly ☐ 2-3 times a month ☐ Monthly ☐ 2-3 time a quarter ☐ 3-4 times a year
☐ Annually or less ☐ Have not attended in over two years

46. If in the previous question you answered Monthly or more, what is your level of involvement in the church that you attend?

- ☐ Periodic volunteer ☐ Very involved leader
☐ Worker for special occasions ☐ Rarely involved
☐ Other _____

47. What has been your recent level of church related small group involvement?

- ☐ Weekly ☐ 2-3 times a month ☐ Monthly ☐ 2-3 time a quarter ☐ 3-4 times a year
☐ Annually or less ☐ Have not attended in over two years
☐ Other _____

48. Do you attend the church, The River? ☐ Yes ☐ No

49. How long have you been a Christ-follower?

- ☐ Less than a Month ☐ 2-6 Months ☐ 6-12 Months ☐ 1-4 years ☐ 5-10 years
☐ 11-15 years ☐ 16-20 years ☐ 21-30 years ☐ Over 30 years
☐ Other _____

50. How has your relationship with others changed over the last three months?

- ☐ Greatly improved ☐ Improved ☐ No change ☐ Some difficulties ☐ Numerous difficulties

Please share any other information you think we need to know about you, your thoughts regarding this questionnaire, or your walk with God:

Daily Table of Contents and Summary for “A Walk on The Mountain” Page 1

Week/Day	SFE	Script	Summary
1/1	Truth	Matthew 5:3	“Blessed” as joy within despite circumstances.
1/2	Truth II	Matthew 5:3	The Kingdom of God is available to the “spiritual zeros.”
1/3	Hunger	John 15:20	How bad to you really want God’s blessing.
1/4	Cost	Proverbs 16:18	We need to recognize and admit our spiritual poverty.
1/5	Promise	Matthew 5:3	We can have a personal relationship with God.
1/6	Step	Romans 10:9-11	Confess your poverty to others.
1/7	Transformation/ Fruit	Isaiah 64:8	Transformation is surrendering our agenda and lives to God. The Fruit is boldness to live for Him.
2/1	Truth	Matthew 5:4	Mourning as a recognition of God’s Grace and how much we do not deserve it— yet it is available
2/2	Hunger	Luke 12:2	How willing are you to face the darkness and sin in your life
2/3	Cost	Luke 9:62	Are we ready to live a life without the sins we are accustomed to
2/4	Promise	Matthew 5:4	Comfort as an encouragement and invitation to come to God
2/5	Step	1 John 1:9	Ask God to speak honestly about our sins and give us the strength to deal with them head on
2/6	Transformation	Psalms 51:7	Transformation manifests itself naturally in a life that has experienced genuine for- giveness and the comfort of God’s arms
2/7	Fruit	Isaiah 29:13	Drive to worship, passionate to tell others and offer the same forgiveness that has been given to us

Outline of SFE Eight-Week Curriculum

APPENDIX B

Daily Table of Contents and Summary for “A Walk on The Mountain” Page 2

Week/Day	SFE	Script	Summary
3/1	Truth	Matthew 5:5	“Meek” does not equal “Weak” but indicates a humble heart in surrender to the Father
3/2	Truth II/Hunger	Matthew 5:6	How willing are you to surrender the control in your life?
3/3	Cost	Luke 9:23 & 24	Losing your comfortable “life” to find new life in Jesus
3/4	Promise	Matthew 5:5 and 6	Experience freedom, joy, celebration and Life
3/5	Step	Ephesians 4:15-16	Getting out of your comfort zone to find full dependence in God
3/6	Transformation	Matthew 5:5	A God-controlled heart and move away from self-centeredness
3/7	Fruit	James 1:26	Being used in mighty ways for the Kingdom of God
4/1	Truth	Matthew 5:7	Merciful, only if you have received and experienced God’s mercy
4/2	Hunger	Luke 7:47	How willing are you to freely give the same mercy that has been extended to you?
4/3	Cost	Matthew 18:21	Showing mercy makes you vulnerable to hurt and anger
4/4	Promise	Matthew 5:7	We will know more of God in our lives as we freely give away
4/5	Step	I John 1:9-10	Recognize our own need for mercy and be intentional in sharing that same mercy to others
4/6	Transformation	Matthew 18:22	Moving from a judgmental heart to an understanding heart
4/7	Fruit	Galatians 5:22-23	Genuine compassion for others and living a life like Christ

Daily Table of Contents and Summary for “A Walk on The Mountain” Page 3

Week/Day	SFE	Script	Summary
5/1	Truth	Matthew 5:8	Purity as being wholly clean and pure in heart
5/2	Cost	Psalms 14:3	Perceptions of the world on pure, Christian hearts
5/3	Hunger	1 Corinthians 2:14	Are you willing to give up the “garbage” that overflows in your life
5/4	Promise	Matthew 5:8	Recognition of the presence of the Holy Spirit and see the ultimate Truth through His eyes
5/5	Step	Revelation 3:16 & 19	How to repent & ask the Holy Spirit to make our hearts new
5/6	Transformation	Psalms 51:10	Freedom from our baggage so that we may see God at work around us and have a heart that reflects His love
5/7	Fruit	Psalms 95:6	What we experience when we finally open our eyes: Awe, worship and praise
6/1	Truth	Matthew 5:9	“Peacemakers” are not necessarily peace-lovers or peaceful
6/2	Cost	Matthew 10:34	Being a peacemaker can cause unsettlement, struggles and pain
6/3	Hunger	Romans 8:6	How badly do we want others to know the peace we possess in Christ
6/4	Promise	Matthew 5:9	Being used as an instrument of God to follow His ultimate will
6/5	Step	Romans 12:20-21	Free yourself from your guilt to make ourselves available to be used as mighty vessels for God
6/6	Transformation	Acts 3:6	Movement from self-focused to others-focused and to break free of the safety and comfort we like
6/7	Fruit	Romans 5:3-5	Calming of the heart and calming of the storm around us

Daily Table of Contents and Summary for “A Walk on The Mountain” Page 4

Week/Day	SFE	Script	Summary
7/1	Truth	Matthew 5:10-12	Following Christ guarantees persecution and does not exempt us from suffering
7/2	Truth II	Matthew 5:12	How to rejoice in the suffering and persecution
7/3	Cost/Hunger	Matthew 10:34-36	Challenges of facing persecution in many forms and how willing are we to sacrifice with the promise of only an eternal reward
7/4	Promise	Matthew 5:10, 12	Is the promise of an eternal reward enough of a genuine motivation?
7/5	Step	Matthew 22:37-39	Letting your transformation shine regardless of the costs
7/6	Transformation	1 Corinthians 27-29	Narrowing of your heart so that the focus is limited to one thing: God
7/7	Fruit	2 Corinthians 3:12	Being a bold witness to Christ—with the mindset of a martyr—one day you will spend eternity with the God you defended
8/1	Truth	Matthew 5:13-16	Letting our light shine so that people may praise God and be a beacon of hope to those lost in despair
8/2	Hunger	Matthew 5:13	Willingness to dive into the trenches and get our hands “dirty”
8/3	Cost	Mark 8:35	Our Christian journey is ultimately about God receiving all acclamation and recognition, not us
8/4	Promise	Matthew 5:15	We are made available to impact others, be a guide in troubled times, and have people seek the Father for something they see in us.
8/5	Step	Acts 1:8	Pray to be reformed, praise God and act/obey His call
8/6	Transformation	John 9:5	Making our hearts available for God’s light to shine through
8/7	Fruit	Galatians 5:22-23	Fruits of the spirit versus the fruits of a fallen and sinful world

APPENDIX C

Instructions for End of Study Questionnaire

Thank you for taking part in the study, “A Walk on The Mountain.” Many of you may not be aware of the fact that “A Walk on The Mountain” is actually one of the many serendipitous outcomes of my doctoral work. My dissertation topic is studying the impact of a specific spiritual formation emphasis (the Truth-to-Fruit focus) on individual’s spiritual growth.

You just completed a part of the necessary elements of that study—going through the study as a part of a small group. The attached questionnaire is another part of the study. Since this is a “study” and not a “proving” of any specific belief, program, or curriculum, I need you to be as honest as you can when you fill out this questionnaire. If the content of the study positively impacted you and your spiritual growth, then mark the questionnaire accordingly. If you did not really glean anything of any value out of the study, mark it accordingly. If you had a negative experience during the small group study and as you encountered Truth-to-Fruit, please indicate that as well. My dissertation is not based on whether the curriculum did or did not have a positive effect. The essence of the dissertation is “*What was the result?*” So, again, please respond honestly.

In order to insure anonymity, do not put your name on the questionnaire. There will be hopefully 40 to 80 questionnaires that will be reviewed at the conclusion of all the small group meetings. All of the questionnaires will be placed in one folder, shuffled, and left untouched until all of the questionnaires are in. Though I and one other person will be entering the data, it is very unlikely I will be able to discern who wrote what. So, please, once more, be as honest as you can.

Please complete the questionnaire before you leave small group. When you have finished filling out the questionnaire, simply turn it in to your small group leader.

Thank you for taking part in this study.

In Christ,

Jim Martin

APPENDIX D

Instructions for End of Reading Questionnaire

Thank you for taking time to read and the study, “A Walk on The Mountain.” You may not be aware of the fact that “A Walk on The Mountain” is actually one of the many serendipitous outcomes of my doctoral work. My dissertation topic is studying the impact of a specific spiritual formation emphasis (the Truth-to-Fruit focus) on individual’s spiritual growth.

You just completed a part of the necessary elements of that study—reading the book “A Walk on The Mountain.” The enclosed questionnaire is another part of the study. Since this is a “study” and not a “proving” of any specific belief, program, or curriculum, I need you to be as honest as you can when you fill out this questionnaire. If the content of the study positively impacted you and your spiritual growth, then mark the questionnaire accordingly. If you did not really glean anything of any value out of the study, mark it accordingly. If you had a negative experience during the small group study and as you encountered Truth-to-Fruit, please indicate that as well. My dissertation is not based on whether the curriculum did or did not have a positive effect. The essence of the dissertation is “*What was the result?*” So, again, please respond honestly.

In order to insure anonymity, do not put your name on the questionnaire. There will be hopefully 40 to 80 questionnaires that will be reviewed. Those 40 to 80 questionnaires include those who experienced “A Walk on The Mountain” in a small group setting, as well as those who read the book on their own. All of the questionnaires will be placed in one folder, shuffled, and left untouched until all of the questionnaires are in. Though I and one other person will be entering the data, it is very unlikely I will be able to discern who wrote what. So, please, once more, be as honest as you can.

Please complete the questionnaire within a few days of finishing the book. Once you have finished filling out the questionnaire, simply place it in the stamped return envelope and return it to me. Please do not put a return address on the envelope.

Thank you for taking part in this study.

In Christ,

Jim Martin

APPENDIX E

Reflection Statement Directions

Thank you for taking part in this evaluation. Please share honestly and openly your opinion of the effectiveness of the emphasis on Truth-to-Fruit on the spiritual formation and health of The River UMC.

Directions: Please type your responses. Try to keep your responses between three-quarters and one full page, double spaced. To insure anonymity, return your responses to me in an unmarked envelope. Only after all responses have been received, will they be read. Please do not put your name on the responses. Please return your responses by January 4, 2008.

Thank you,
Jim Martin

APPENDIX F

Instructions to Questionnaire Review Team

I am trying to create a questionnaire that would help track, or somehow measure the degree of change (if any) in five specific areas of spiritual formation. I will most likely be planting a church this summer. The “Reader’s Digest” version of my dissertation is that most of the books on church planting and church health focus on structures and ministries. They suggest small groups, dynamic worship, missional outreach, etc. All of these various structures and ministries are supposed to be informed by what the church planting experts call “core values.” My contention is that if you bring together a group of self-centered people who have experienced little if any life transformation by the Holy Spirit, that self-centered mindset will inform the core values which will in turn inform and form the structure and ministry of the church. Churches are not going to be God-filled and lost-people-centered until the hearts of the people who make up and lead the church are constantly being transformed into true Christ-likeness through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. So, I started thinking about what typically needs to happen in a person’s life that helps open the door to the Holy Spirit and a transformed life. I concluded (after MUCH thought—which hurt my head, Bible study, prayer and literature review) that there are five important foci:

- 1) Communication and embracing of the *Truth* of the gospel (**John 8:32** you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.)
- 2) A *yearning desire* on the part of the person for God in his/her life. (**Jeremiah 29:13** You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.)
- 3) A willingness to pay the *cost* often inherent in true surrender and transformation (“Whoever loses his life for my sake shall find it” Luke 9:24)
- 4) A recognition and accountability of a *transformation* down to the core of the person (**2 Corinthians 5:17** if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!)
- (5) Some *manifestation* of that transformation (**Matthew 7:16** By their fruit you will recognize them.)

My belief is that if these 5 spiritual formation emphases are focused on individually and corporately from the onset of a church plant, the effect will be transformed lives that lead to a surrendered church. These will be emphasized with the original core leadership team, new member classes, small group meetings, sermons, teaching series, etc.

The questionnaire I am asking you to look over and respond to is an instrument that I hope will tell me at least two things:

- 1) Are people progressing in their experience of these 5 emphases.
- 2) Is that progression having an impact on the concept and direction of the church plant.

These questionnaires will be “offered” as someone initially comes into the fellowship of the church AND every 3 months after that. I will start with the group who is gathered 6 months before the first public launch and give the last questionnaire 6 months after the launch. The quantifiable measure of the impact of these 5 emphases will be the growth and health of the church plant itself.

I am simply asking for your impressions. I need to know about clarity. I am not sure I will use this questionnaire with those who first come to the church or use another. If it looks like this questionnaire could adequately represent the spirituality of a person's without ANY idea about the specifics of the church and what I wrote above, then I will use it. There's about 7 of the other volunteers who are getting this questionnaire without this or ANY explanation. If their responses are similar to yours, that may mean that I might be able to use the questionnaire throughout the entire process. That is my hope.

If you can do the test on the computer, that would be great. It is in WORD (.doc) format. I'm using a somewhat newer version of WORD, but it should be able to work with WORD software that is within 6 years or so. You can make remarks in the middle of it, or group all of your remarks at the end. To answer the questionnaire, just put an "X" where a box would be. Where it asks for answers, share what you're willing and please be honest. I will be the only one reading these. The instructions on the questionnaire itself state that an objective group of analysts will examine the questionnaire. That relates only to the finished product and those who will be a part of my church plant.

Some of your answers will inform how the test is reformed and narrowed. It is longer than it will eventually be. Let me know what questions can easily go. If you think of a question that would help, PLEASE write that down. I have no ego to bruise in regards to this, so please be brutal, cold and unfeeling. ☺ If you do have a somewhat recent WORD program, you can make corrections that will stand out clearly by going to the tool bar at the top and clicking "Tools". On the pull-down menu, you'll see "Track Changes." (You can also push Cntrl-Sft-E to choose track changes) That will make the text you enter or the changes you make appear in red or green. You might want to have the document in "Normal" view (go to "View") on the tool bar. Tracking changes works better that way.

If you are unable to work on this with the computer or if it's easier to print it up, feel free. The only problem is you'll need to mail it back to me. If you chose that route, send it to:
 Jim Martin
 (A great human being)
 202 North Maple St. #1
 Wilmore, KY 40390

You'll note a reference once or twice to "The River." As of right now, that is the name of the church I hope to plant. I know, it's "deep." Get it? Deep!!... River!! Don't you wish you were helping me plant this church?!

APPENDIX G

List of Excel Spreadsheet Topics

Demographic and Question perspective Spreadsheets

Frequency of exposure to other Christian material
Level of education
Gender
Health during SFE study period
Job situation during SFE study period
Life situation during SFE study period
Duration of Christian walk
Small group participation
Response to questionnaire Question 1 regarding Truth
Response to questionnaire Question 5 regarding Cost
Response to questionnaire Question 11 regarding Hunger
Number of response to questionnaire Question 21 regarding Step
Number of response to questionnaire Question 24 regarding Transformation
Response to questionnaire Question 27 regarding Transformation

Open-Ended Question Spreadsheets

Question 4—Truth
Question 10—Cost
Question 14—Hunger
Question 17—Promise
Question 21—Step
Question 24—Transformation
Question 26—The Difference between Truth and Fruit
Question 28—Fruit
Question 33—Perceived difficulty in Understanding or Experiencing SFE
Comment section at close of Questionnaire

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